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PITA-TEN

based on the works of
KOGE-DONBO

YUKARI OCHIAI

lightnovel



PITA-TEN VOL. 1

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How to Spend a Day Slightly in the Past

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PROLOGUE



“Gosh, isn’t it nice to be outside on a day like this, Kotarou?” Koboshi asked. She peered into Kotarou’s face, her eyes wide and bright.

In response to Koboshi’s energetic inquiry, Kotarou smiled and nodded. “Yeah, it really is.”

He took a deep breath and stretched his hands towards the sky. A refreshing breeze brushed softly against his hair, revitalizing not only his body but his spirit as well.

Under the clear Sunday sky, Kotarou and friends gathered at an embankment by the neighborhood river. They planned to hold a garden party, in hopes of dispelling the oppressive air their upcoming entrance exams cast upon them.

A boy ran up to Kotarou and gently tapped him on the shoulder. “Where’s Shia and Misha? They sure are late,” the boy remarked. He brushed away the hair, dampened during his sprint, which had fallen into his

eyes and across his forehead. This boy, this vision of perfection, was none other than Takashi "Ten-chan" Ayanokoji.

Another boy raced up to the crew. Sporting a bowl cut and round, coke bottle glasses, he seemed slightly out of place, like a holdover of some age long gone.

"Hiroshi Mitarai, heir of the distinguished House of Mitarai, at your service!"

Kotarou, Koboshi, Takashi, and even strange Hiroshi...all four were sixth graders, attending Seiei Private Academy, Misaki Elementary Division. Shia and Misha were Kotarou's neighbors. And although at times they fought among one another, at the end of the day, they were tried and true friends.

Takashi shot a sideways glance at Hiroshi. "Who the heck invited that loser, anyhow?" he whined at the heavens. "Lame."

Overhearing Takashi, Koboshi stepped quickly to his side and pulled him into a private huddle.

"Oh, don't be like that. Dai-chan's a lot of fun..." she whispered, motioning with her hands. "And besides, there's 'that' to consider..." She pointed to the tables, which shone brilliantly. On top was a sea of lacquered sushi boxes, each stacked five high.

"See those boxes over there? Well, they're filled to

the brim with mad expensive sushi. Dai-chan brought them for today. So please, Ten-chan...don't start any fights today, okay?" Koboshi begged, clasping her hands together.

Takashi nodded. "Well, if that's the case, I guess I don't have a choice, do I?" He grinned and slurped back his slobber.

Two girls approached from across the embankment.

"Hey, Koboshi, Ten-chan, look!" Kotarou cried. "It's Shia and Misha. Hey, Misha, over here! This way!!"

Following Kotarou's voice, Misha turned to wave a large pot at the assembled friends.

"Hiyas~su! We'll be right theres, Kotarou~su!"

Shia walked slowly behind Misha, carrying a large bundle in her hands. "Oh, Misha, you'll fall if you run so fast. Please be careful."

Now that everyone had arrived, they set the scene for a magnificent party. When finished, they sat on their folding chairs.

"Aw-right, everyone, a toast!" Takashi said, raising his juice-filled paper cup to the sky.

The party had officially begun!

The table was laid out with Shia's special-

ties—deep fried chicken, croquettes, shredded sushi, Japanese salad and hand cut fruit... there was so much to choose from, and that didn't even include the boxes of sushi Hiroshi brought. It was an absolutely gorgeous sight to behold.

"I feel so bad you always have to cook, Shia... but we really appreciate it," Kotarou said.

Slightly embarrassed by Kotarou's polite words of thanks, a blushing Shia shook her head quickly. "Actually, Misha woke up bright and early to help me make all this today. She even prepared a special soup..."

The group froze with their eyes wide and mouths tight. Although Misha seemed outwardly flaky, she was a sincere and kind soul... which unfortunately had little bearing on her cooking being any good, much less edible.

"Misha...made it...?" Kotarou gulped, remembering the curry Misha made which didn't really taste like curry... Yes, he had to admit she certainly tried her best, but...the taste.

He could tell the others felt the same way.

"Kotarou? What's the matter~su? You look all glum all of a sudden~su," Misha asked. She scooped a generous serving of soup into a paper bowl. Kotarou stared at her. Seeing the look in her eyes, knowing how

hard she had worked, he just couldn't bring himself to say anything negative.

"Oh, it's nothing. But wow... so Misha's soup, eh? I can't wait to try it," Kotarou said optimistically, telling himself it would be different this time—things would be okay!

"Okies! Then be sure to eat up before it gets coldy cold!" she exclaimed, and ladled out the contents of the giant pot into bowls for the others as well.



Glancing into the pot, Takashi looked just about ready to faint. "Whoa, way to go, Misha. There's, like, a whole tomato in there. Wow! And it's like you even left the stem on. It's so dynamic and so totally you!"

Floating atop the soup was a whole tomato, complete with stem. And off to the side was a creepy looking...could it be? A chicken's...foot?!

"It's very good, you know. I got to taste it earlier."

Seeing Shia sip at her soup with a smile, the others gingerly began to follow suit.

"Oh, urm...it's good, Misha," Kotarou remarked, and he flashed an OK sign at her. The others agreed

and soon drained their bowls completely dry.

"That was yummy, but I feel a little strange all of a sudden. A little...sleepy," Koboshi said with a yawn. Takashi nodded, infected by her yawn.

"You're sleepies~su? Well, now that I think about it, I did put a special sort of spice in it... Up in the heavens...they called it Sleep Blossoms and..."

But Shia and Hiroshi heard little of Misha's words, as they too began to nod off where they sat. Soon after, Misha too let out a big yawn, her eyes glazed in preparation to enter the Realms of Dreams.

"Sleep...Blossoms? Wha...what are those...? Did everyone else...fall asleep? Fuwaa..."

Even as Kotarou yawned, even as his thoughts slowed to almost a halt, he thought, *What a fun day. With all my friends here, gathered around me... This must be what happiness is all about.*

Ahhh, it feels so good.

I feel like I'm about to have a nice dream...

And so, just like those around him, Kotarou...fell into a deep sleep, amid this weird and wonderful crew.

This story focuses on the tiny memories hidden in the depths of the hearts of Kotarou and his friends... those small but wondrous fragments of the past.



STORY 1

How to Make Friends



1

“Kotarou, do you think you could settle down a little, please? You make me sad, the way you’re behaving...”

Located within the suburbs was Sun Kindergarten. From atop the teaching pedestal, Miss Kana, the home-room teacher for the Apple Class, the Kindergarten’s oldest group of students, let out a deep sigh.

The reason was quite clear to everyone in the room. If given a moment unattended, the Apple Class’s problem child, Higuchi Kotarou, would pinch another child’s cheek or play with their clay. Listening was simply out of the question, and Miss Kana was at her wit’s end.

“Kotarou is really cheery, fun and vibrant...which is great, but he’s just a bit mischievous, isn’t he? I’m sure he doesn’t mean any harm with the things he does...so I hope you can all forgive him.”

The apology had barely made it past her lips

before she found herself swooping down to comfort the hysterically crying child who sat behind Kotarou, whom he had just finished antagonizing. Even with one eye on him at all times, she didn't know what he'd get himself into next. Every day was a new, draining experience.

Of course, nothing bothered Kotarou. If there was something exciting going on, he'd simply do as he pleased. No matter how much he was scolded, he never showed any sign of remorse—if he even knew what remorse was.

"Teacher, Kotarou just went out of the classroom—and he's outside now! And I don't think that's okay," reported Koboshi Uematsu, the class's model student, her hand raised.

Pressing her hand to her forehead, Miss Kana sighed for the umpteenth time that day. Doesn't he get tired of just flitting here and there...? she thought. Resigned as she was, she quickly glanced outside.

All alone in the school's playground sandbox, Kotarou busied himself with the passionate production of a giant sand castle. He seemed quite into it, and looked really happy...

Yes, it was her job to expand the talents and horizons of her children, Miss Kana thought. But

still...no, playing alone was an important step in the development of children, after all.

"Guys, just stay quiet a minute, okay?"

"Grr, that Kotarou! He's always causing trouble for Teacher and us! If he does something again, I'm really gonna lay into him!" Koboshi said reprovngly as she watched Miss Kana leave the classroom.

Koboshi stared intently at Kotarou. When she joined the Apple Class, Kotarou's was the first name she learned. It happened during her very first drawing hour, when Kotarou defaced her brand new drawing pad.

"Yahoo! It's a sun! Isn't it pretty!!" he proclaimed after doodling over her work with a bright orange crayon. Of course, to Kotarou, it hadn't been a "doodle," not one bit...

On the other hand, Koboshi just sat there, stunned and speechless. Her only thoughts were, *What? Why?!*

"Don't you think the sun's pretty? I love it!!" he said with a grin, not a smidge of remorse or wrong doing on his face. At which point he proceeded to draw a sun on the drawing pads of the other children around him, that same grin plastered over his face.

Koboshi vowed never to forget the day he ruined

her brand new drawing pad, and ever since that day spoke up whenever she uncovered Kotarou in the midst of a prank or whatever.

After escorting Kotarou back to the classroom, Miss Kana returned to her place before the kindergarteners, slowly recovering her breath.

"I'm so sorry to keep everyone waiting...Kotarou, you apologize as well."

"Sorry," Kotarou quipped, bowing his head quickly. No one noticed the glare Koboshi threw him as he returned to his seat. Confirming he sat down, Miss Kana began to speak.

"Today, we'll be changing seats. I'd like everyone to pull a number from here." She held up a box. "And sit in the corresponding seat according to the seating chart on the blackboard. Okay?"

One by one, the children pulled a piece of paper out of the box Miss Kana had prepared.

"Let's see, I'm eight..." Kotarou said. His new seat was in the second row, right next to the window. And Koboshi's seat was...

"Seven?! What? But that's right next to Kotarou! Are you serious?!" she cried. Would she go through the rest of the year being teased and pestered by Kotarou, she wondered? The thought was disheartening

at the very least.

"Um, Koboshi...right? Howdy neighbor," he said, flashing a bright smile.

No, don't fall for that smile, she told herself. She put on a prim countenance and turned to Kotarou.

"Hello. Pleased to make your acquaintance, Kotarou."



Just because Kotarou and Koboshi were now neighbors, that didn't put an end to his pranks.

"Look at me, Koboshi," he'd say to her, squishing his nose up to resemble a pig's snout.

She'd initially protest before bursting into laughter. "What...? Bwa ha ha ha! St-stop that!"

The laughter was promptly followed by Miss Kana's chiding, "You two need to pay attention!" It was becoming quite an everyday occurrence, much to Koboshi's chagrin.

Irritated, Koboshi finally confronted Kotarou.

"Why are you always clowning around, Kotarou?"

"Well, because it's more fun that way. I mean, aren't you having fun in Kindergarten now, Ko-

boshi?"

Other than the little, "Eh?" she let out, Koboshi was rendered speechless.

He was right. Since the seat swap, the days had become a lot more fun. But...was that really because of Kotarou? No, it couldn't be. It couldn't be because of someone so overly goofy and unserious. There's no way it had anything to do with him.

Suddenly, Koboshi's mind was filled with a thousand thoughts. But she pushed them all aside and quite coldly asked him to quit bugging her before she turned to face Miss Kana.

"All right, class, today we will be learning some origami. Everyone turn on your listening ears, and let's all make a beautiful tulip, shall we?"

Miss Kana affixed a large sheet of origami onto the blackboard and began to explain the instructions.

As much as he wanted to go outside to play, Kotarou took out a piece of origami paper and placed it on his desk.

I never wanted to go to Kindergarten, he thought as he began to fold his paper. It was so much more fun playing at home. Going out to catch bugs, speeding down the slide at the park... But he came because his mother told him he'd meet lots of friends and have

tons of fun here.

And just like his mother said, Kindergarten was indeed fun. He learned a bunch of new games, and Miss Kana was great... But he really disliked sitting in front of a desk all day, except during drawing.

As for the origami, he and his mother had often folded tulips together, so he finished quite quickly.

When he became bored, Kotarou always wanted to do something he was told not to do, like bug his friends. He was especially impressed with his feisty new neighbor Koboshi. The way she got mad, the way she laughed—it was fun to watch the range of emotions she covered. But because all he did was tease her, she seemed to hate him.

Burying his face in his desk, Kotarou stole a glance at Koboshi from behind his arm. Something about her was different today. He wondered what was wrong. Curious, he raised his head.

Sniff. Sniff...

Although she was trying her very best to stifle it, Koboshi was crying.

“What’s the matter? Koboshi?”

Koboshi sprawled herself over her desk, frantically covering it with her arms. “I...it’s nothing. It’s...none of...none of your...business...Kotarou...”

she choked the words out, and stared at her desk. *Sniff. Sniffle.*

Kotarou scanned her desktop. There were a dozen crumpled up origami sheets poking out from her desk. *So that's it...* He nodded. *So she's not good at origami?*

He took out one of his own origami sheets and showed it to Koboshi.

"Here, try to fold yours like I do, okay? Start out like this." He folded his paper skillfully. Koboshi watched out of the corner of her eye, and quickly began to copy him.

In silence, the two folded their origami as best as they could.

"And that is that." Kotarou smiled at Koboshi as he pressed out the final fold.

"I did it...!" she exclaimed out loud despite herself, holding a perfectly made pink tulip in her hands.

Miss Kana walked over to Koboshi. "Oh my, Koboshi. You folded that tulip very well indeed..." She took the pink tulip from Koboshi and showed it off to the entire classroom.

"See Koboshi's tulip, class? If you follow the instructions, you'll be able to fold one just as well as

she did... Now, how about a big round of applause for Koboshi, class."

"Ah, but I didn't make that by..."

The sounds of applause drowned out the end of Koboshi's statement. Koboshi stared at her hands awkwardly. She wasn't able to tell everyone it was Kotarou who showed her how to fold the tulip.

She glanced over to him in apology, but was greeted by a big thumbs up and a bigger smile. A sudden sense of happiness overwhelmed her.



Koboshi waited for Kotarou in front of the Kindergarten room. Kotarou came skipping along, swinging his bag, and Koboshi ran out in front of him.

"Wah!! You scared me! What's the matter?! And what's with that scary look on your face?" Kotarou asked, eyes big and wide.

Deliberately, Koboshi said, "Thank you for today. And I'm so sorry!"

"For what?"

Koboshi lowered her head slightly, in a mix of gratitude and apology, but Kotarou, still quite confused, asked her again.

"Urm, about the origami tulip. You helped me with that, and I couldn't tell anyone...Miss Kana even praised me for it..."

Kotarou swung his bag around, rather unaffected. "Don't worry about that. I mean, you're the one that folded it after all, Koboshi. So it's all good, don'tcha think?"

And with that, he waved goodbye and began his walk home.

Left by herself, Koboshi felt all the strength and will within her drain away. She was simply floored by Kotarou's anticlimactic reaction.

Maybe Kotarou is actually really sweet inside, she thought as she watched him walk away...

2

Since that day, Koboshi saw Kotarou in a new light. Of course, she still got angry at Kotarou for the string of unending pranks he played on her but not in the same, "I'm gonna get you one day," sense she had before. Although sometimes she wasn't quite sure if they were friends or enemies, one thing was certain: despite all their arguments, they were beginning to become quite good chat buddies who had a lot of fun together. In truth, to Kotarou, who often had problems talking to girls, Koboshi was the very first girl he felt comfortable talking with.

"In about a month's time, we'll be putting on a performance for Parents' Day," Miss Kana announced as she gazed over the class. "What type of performance would you like to present?"

Whispers begat murmurs and murmurs became voices as the thoughts of the kindergarteners gained momentum.

"I think a play, teacher."

"Let's do a song."

"That's bor~ing!"

"How about a magic show? My papa taught me, so I know how to do it already."

"That's way lame!"

With everyone talking at once, the classroom became the definition of loud.

"All right, everyone, settle down now. Why don't we decide this with a vote, then? Please raise your hand for the performance you wish to put on."

Miss Kana wrote: *play, singing, magic show, dancing* on the blackboard. She called out each choice and the children raised their hands in support of what they liked best. In the end, with a majority vote, it was determined the Apple Class would put on a play. With that decided, they moved on to choosing what sort of play to perform, and with the girls in the class literally screaming for something romantic, "Snow White" was settled upon.

"Now then, who shall we pick to be the actors? Would anyone like to volunteer? You may nominate a classmate, too, if you wish," Miss Kana continued.

But her words were lost in Kotarou and Koboshi's

chatter.

"I saw this prince guy on this anime...and oh my goodness, it was soooo romantic. It was the best ever!" Koboshi swooned, staring dreamily at the ceiling.

"Oh yeah?" Kotarou mused, thinking about how much he didn't understand about girls.

After all, in every picture book he'd seen, princes wore white tights and white tights were simply not cool. He just couldn't wrap his mind around how something like that could be so dreamy to girls.

"I guess you boys just don't understand how we girls see things. You just don't have that dreamer in you."

"Really, I'm okay with not understanding something like that."

As customary, they began to bicker.

WHAM!

Miss Kana's hands landed upon Kotarou's desk. The jolt shocked the pair and knocked the words right out of their mouths.

Miss Kana stood before them, glowering, her arms folded across her chest. "Why do you two always think it's okay to chitter-chatter when I'm speaking?"

"Sorry," the two mumbled hurriedly, completely taken aback by Miss Kana's forceful manner.

Perhaps thinking she had been a bit too harsh, Miss Kana cleared her throat and continued on kindly. "You two will be performing the title roles of the prince and princess in the play. Do you understand?"

"Whaaaa—t?! I don't want to. Let someone else do that!"

Although they turned down the parts immediately, Miss Kana was not in a forgiving mood. "I, urm... I can't do that. While you two were chitter-chattering, the class nominated you for those parts. If you had bothered to listen to a word I said, I'm sure you would have been able to nominate someone else instead... At any rate, good luck as the leads. I'll be cheering you on... Now then, shall we decide on the other parts too?"

And with that, Miss Kana turned her attention back to the blackboard. *Maybe if I give him more responsibility, he won't be so rowdy,* Miss Kana thought. *And since he'll be playing the part alongside his new neighbor and friend, Koboshi, he'll be sure to have fun with his new assignment as well.*

Meanwhile, Kotarou and Koboshi looked at each other and let out a loud sigh.

"What are we going to do, Kotarooooou?!"

"Don't look at me..."

From this odd series of events, Kotarou and Koboshi made their theatrical debut.



"Woohoo, we're all done! It's perfect," Kotarou beamed as he packed his things up, getting ready to go home.

Koboshi jumped with joy.

In preparation for the play the Apple Class was putting on for Parents' Day, they had been working together on the set for "Snow White." They had just completed the house of the Seven Dwarfs and although the window was a bit lopsided, all in all they'd done a great job.

"I wish I could make sets instead of having to act," Kotarou said.

"Oh, you're much better at acting than I am, so you'll be fine, Kotarou. I...I don't even know where to start... What am I going to do?"

Seeing the tears well up in the corners of Koboshi's eyes, Kotarou reached into his pocket and produced a shining pink bead, which he offered to her.

"Eh? What's this?" Koboshi asked, glancing between the pink bead and Kotarou's face.

"It's a leftover piece from the decorations. It's really pretty so I wanted to give it to you... You can't tell Miss Kana, though."

Although he had originally saved the bead in hopes of giving it to his mom, seeing the sad expression on Koboshi's face tugged at something inside him, made him want to do something to make her smile.

"Are you sure you want me to have it?"

Kotarou nodded strongly. "So cheer up, Koboshi. I think you'll do great in the play. I really do."

"Thank you... Gosh, it's so cute."

The pink bead sparkled in her hand. Staring at it, she did indeed feel a bit better. But it was the thought that Kotarou was truly worried about her that filled her heart with joy. With so much joy, that to Koboshi, all the world shone with a brilliant luster.



With only one more day to the Parents' Day performance, Kotarou's house was abuzz with anticipation. Kotarou's costume wasn't quite ready, so his mother was putting the final touches on it as he

watched her intently.

Wow, he thought. Her hands are amazing. She can make anything.

"Alrighty... Done! You're all set for tomorrow!"

His prince costume consisted of bright white tights, a gold lamé vest, and a pair of gym short-like pants that puffed up, like a balloon. Seeing that the costume fit Kotarou quite well, his mother let out a sigh of relief.

"Oh, good. Looks like it'll do. It didn't turn out quite as well as I expected, though. I'm so sorry, sweetie."

He took a seat by his mother's side. "Don't say that. I think it's perfect. But I really don't want to wear those white tights. They're just so uncool. If you don't want to, you don't have to come watch me in the play, okay?" He pouted, his cheeks as round as his pants.

"Of course I'm going to go. Besides, it's not about looking cool. It's about seeing you do your very best at something, and that's all I could ever ask of you."

"What if I fail? That would be pretty embarrassing, don't you think?"

"Even if you fail, my Kotarou's going to be in that play, so that's all I care about... I think maybe

when you're older you'll begin to understand the way I feel."

I don't know about that, he thought. Right now, he didn't want his mother to see him in anything less than an ideal setting.

"Well then, shall we have dinner? I made your favorite curry so you'd be full of energy for tomorrow," his mother said. She hung up his costume and walked into the kitchen. "Hurry, hurry!"

His mother's curry was his favorite meal of all time. He loved how she always put in huge chunks of potato while skimping on the yucky stuff, like carrots and onions. Of course, little did he know she ground all those carrots and onions into a paste so he wouldn't notice them. Then there was the chicken. And finally that sweet flavoring which made it Kotarou's very own special curry.

His father's curry came in a separate pot. Once, Kotarou was curious about how it tasted and stole a bite, only to end up wheezing from the spice, despite all the water he guzzled down.

They laughed at him, wholly amused. "Still can't handle that, eh, Kotarou?"

He swore to himself that one day very soon, he too would be able to eat the adult curry. He swore it, but

he couldn't help but love his own curry best, cooked in that bright white enameled pot, just for him.

As he stuffed his mouth full of curry, his mother asked how it tasted.

"It's sooo yummy. I promise I'll try my best tomorrow," he said. He stopped shoveling food in his mouth just long enough to flash a V sign.

Even though he hadn't really been motivated about the play before, thinking about how happy it would make his mother urged him on, and he hoped he wouldn't mess up, even in the slightest.



Parents' Day finally arrived, and the Apple Class's play, "Snow White," began. It was filled with little mishaps, like Kotarou nervously pitching forward and dropping his crown during his first appearance, and the kids playing the part of the horse didn't quite get their feet in sync, but all in all the play went smoothly, and the seats were filled with smiling, laughing parents.

Then finally, the grand finale. The scene where the prince was supposed to kiss Snow White on the cheek arrived.

A large spotlight shone upon the two, turning

the stage into their very own world. As Snow White sat upon a chair with her eyes closed, the prince was supposed to walk up slowly and kiss her. Koboshi's Snow White squeezed her eyes shut. Thinking that the play would be over soon, Kotarou's prince let his guard down.

The audience was as quiet as could be, gently watching over the emotional last scene.

Let's do this, Kotarou told himself before stepping forward.

Just as Miss Kana directed him to do, Kotarou made sure his back was straight and tall while his gaze stayed forward and not on his feet.

But because of that, he did not notice it. He did not notice the mushroom that was part of the set, positioned right before his next step.

Crick! His ankle twisted strangely as his foot made contact with the mushroom.

He wanted to cry out, but told himself that it was a play and to simply deal with the pain. Apparently his legs missed the memo.

Kotarou teetered for an instant before making a beeline towards Koboshi's Snow White.

"They're gonna collide!!" a voice from the audience exclaimed.

Oh no, Kotarou thought. He had to stop himself.

Fighting back the pain, he tried to transfer his weight behind him and put on the brakes. But it was too late. With momentum working against him, Kotarou continued to lurch forth. As their bodies met, he grabbed onto Koboshi, almost as if hugging her tight to him.

Kiss.

Kotarou's lips missed Koboshi's cheek by a mile, instead landing upon her lips...?!

Still entangled, the two fell over the chair together.

Boom! A large crash resonated throughout the auditorium.

Kotarou knew he had to keep Koboshi safe, and at the very last moment, managed to spin his body beneath hers so that he'd take the brunt of the impact as they crashed against the stage.

"Are you two all right?" Miss Kana cried, racing from the side of the stage to help the two up.

"I...I'm okay, but...is Koboshi?"

Koboshi was lying next to Kotarou. Thanks to Kotarou's acrobatics, Koboshi had escaped the fall without so much as a scratch.

"I...I'm okay too!" she said, her face bright red.

"Oh, good. Let's go do our final bows then, shall we?"

Miss Kana led the two to the center of the stage and bowed.

Clap clap clap clap...The audience howled with appreciation, in part due to excitement the minor accident injected into the play.

Phew! Kotarou thought, and let out a sigh of relief.

"Sorry about that, Koboshi. I'm really sorry for messing up that last scene," he whispered as they received their ovation.

For a second, Koboshi hugged her shoulders to herself. She whispered back, "It's all right. But...I'm so glad it was you playing the prince, Kotarou... Thank you for protecting me."

He winked, wearing a cheesy grin. "Well, of course I would! I'm a prince after all, and protecting princesses is my job."

Koboshi's heart skipped a beat.

Even after the play was over, Koboshi stood by herself in a daze.

Kotarou kissed me...

Blush.



She could have sworn she felt his lips brush against hers as they fell. Koboshi touched her fingertips to her mouth.

Oh my gosh!♥ She couldn't help but jump with joy. Just thinking about it colored her a deep shade of red from the tips of her ears all the way down to her neck.

Oh my gosh! That was her first kiss.

When he held me on stage, I thought my heart was going to leap out of my chest, she thought.

Badump badump.

Her heart wouldn't listen to her anymore, almost as if it were no longer hers to command. She had been so happy when he protected her the way he did.

Badump badump.

Just thinking about Kotarou made her heart race.

What's wrong with me? she wondered. *Am I falling for Kotarou?*

Koboshi was still unsure of her feelings.



From that day on, Koboshi found herself overly conscious of Kotarou's presence. The way he held

his pencil, the way he yawned...although these little things had never piqued her interest before, seeing them now made her heart sing.

Kotarou didn't seem to notice much of anything, and continued to chat with Koboshi as he had before.

So Koboshi had little choice but to carry on as well, squabbling with Kotarou over little things and just enjoying her days with him. More than anything, Koboshi treasured any time they had to chat together.

"Okay, class," Miss Kana said. "Drawing time. Today, I'd like you all to draw something about your home, or your mother and father."

The sounds of children scrambling for their drawing pads and crayons resounded through the classroom.

"What are you going to draw, Kotarou?"

"Hmmm, maybe a picture about when we went to the zoo recently... Have you ever seen a chimpanzee before, Koboshi?Well, the thing about chimps is, they're incredibly smart. And so when people they don't like walk by, they fling their poop at them... So when I went to the zoo, the guy next to me got a face full, and it was soooo funny."

Kotarou could barely contain his laughter as he recalled the scene. The eyes of the bald man next to him had almost popped out of his head in surprise when it happened.

“Huh? What are you talking about?” Koboshi said, her eyes as wide as the bald man’s had been.

And so Kotarou began to enthusiastically tell Koboshi all about his zoo adventures. How a giraffe had almost bitten his hand off when he tried to feed it, and how lion cubs were small and cute, just like kittens. He even talked about the box lunch he had eaten with his parents...

Koboshi felt happy just gazing upon Kotarou’s animated face. *The tip of Kotarou’s nose gets just a bit crinkled when he’s happy*, she thought. *How incredibly cute!* ♥

“Kotarou, Koboshi, are your hands on vacation? If not, please start drawing.”

The pair had starting talking and completely forgotten about their assignment until Miss Kana’s warning.

“Oh no, we’d better start then... But it’s so weird...” Kotarou mumbled as he began to draw a brown chimpanzee on his paper.

“What is?”

"Well, it's like...I guess, it's like when you're around, I become such a chatterbox. It's not a bad thing. I guess it just means you're easy to talk to."

"R...really? That's great. You can talk to me about anything. I really enjoy talking to you too, Kotarou."

"Thanks, Koboshi... By the way, could I borrow an orange crayon?"

Kotarou peeked into Koboshi's crayon box.

"Oh, of course. But, um... You're just missing orange, Kotarou?"

"Yeah. I love orange. It's my favorite color so I always use it up first. Orange is just really cheerful, don't you think? Like the sunrise and the sunset, those are both orange, right? I can stare at them all day. Because they're so beautiful... I just love how the sky goes from blue to orange. It's the best. I like to watch sunsets from the veranda with my mom. She loves it too!"

Kotarou loved those moments that he and his mother shared. He loved seeing the sky melt into graduated shades of orange. How the orange sky slowly turned gray, and how by the pale light of the stars, a sky-colored, almost translucent moon appeared like magic in the sky.

And then there was the twinkling of the stars as

they blinked down upon the Earth—.

“Oh my, it’s already dinner time... I got entranced again. The sky grants such happiness, don’t you think...?” his mother would say, and laugh as she headed towards the kitchen.

Kotarou would remain on the balcony, staring at the sky until the moon slipped out of its pale shawl and revealed its true, bright white color. On cue, he would hear his mother’s voice calling him to dinner.

He loved those moments so much, no matter how many times they played out.

“Hmmm. You’re still such a baby aren’t you, Kotarou? Watching the sky with your mother like that,” Koboshi said, drawing Kotarou out of his thoughts.

“It’s not like that. Here, you can have this back,” he snapped. She just didn’t understand the concept of what a man thought was romantic.

Maybe I shouldn’t have called him a baby, Koboshi thought. Maybe that was a mistake?

Seeing the pout on Kotarou’s lips, she felt a twinge of remorse. It quickly passed. *Oh well.* She was too tickled about discovering another side to Kotarou’s usually bright and sunny demeanor to think too much about anything else.

“Everyone done?”

"Yes, ma'am!" Kotarou said at the top of his lungs.

Miss Kana trained a kind gaze over Kotarou's drawing. "So you went to the zoo did you, Kotarou? Goodness, you drew this very well. The sunset is just beautiful," she remarked.

Kotarou, his mother and his father stood in front of the chimpanzee cage. In the background was an orange sunset. All three flashed brilliant smiles. It was a warm picture that exuded happiness.

"I wish I could go to the zoo again..." Kotarou murmured, quite happy with the way his drawing turned out.

A few months later, leaving behind the happy memories of Kindergarten, Kotarou graduated to elementary school.

3

Kotarou had just about gotten used to elementary school as the cherry blossoms began to fall.

He was so pleased with his new sailor uniform. Even when his mother asked him to change out of it so it wouldn't get dirty, of course he refused and instead, set out with her on a shopping excursion decked out in full uniform.

They hadn't been out shopping together in quite some time, so Kotarou was terribly excited.

"It's dangerous out here, so settle down a bit," she cautioned.

"I'll be fine," he replied, leaving her voice behind as he skipped ahead of her along the road.

On the way, they stopped by a fancy goods shop where, although he didn't think it was all that boyish a buy, he picked up a slouchy, stuffed bunny rabbit. He saw her staring at him from the back of the store, her eyes crying out to him to take her home. He couldn't

bring himself to walk away. It would be his very first stuffed animal.

"I want this!"

"Goodness, you're still a baby, aren't you?" his mother laughed, letting his whine work on her.



It happened on their way back from shopping. All they had to do was turn one more corner and they'd be home.

A car came speeding towards them...

"GAAAHHH!"

SCREEECH!

CRASH!

The ear-splitting scream of the engine.

Everything happened in slow motion.

Everything around them stopped.

"Kotarou!"

He couldn't hear anything but the sound of his mother calling his name. Then his mother's sun-kissed scent surrounded him. He was being held tightly in his mother's arms.

Mom, I can't breathe if you hold me so tightly, he wanted to tell her as he looked into her face.

But it hurt so much the words never came.

For a split second, his mother looked as if she was about to cry, but instead she simply smiled.

The kindest, gentlest smile.

PUSH.

His mother's hands pushed Kotarou away.

Eh? What are you doing? he thought.

The force sent him tumbling, falling to the side of the road.

That hurt, Mom. Did I do something wrong?

Holding his reeling head, he climbed to his feet, and turned towards his mother.

A truck bore down on her.

No, Mom! Don't go right. Don't go there! Go left!

He could already see it. He already saw as clear as day where the truck was headed.

I have to tell her. Listen to me, Mom! Listen to my voice...!

But his voice did not reach her.

SCREEEEEECHHHHHHHHHH.

He heard the sound of the brakes grinding against the asphalt.

He squeezed his eyes shut.

And when he opened them, his mother was gone.

He saw the truck, stopped sideways in the middle of the street, white smoke rising from it.

Lying next to the truck, he saw his mother's crushed shopping basket and...

"Mom!" Kotarou screamed. He screamed until he could scream no more. Over and over again.

"Oh my God, it's horrible!"

"Someone call an ambulance!"

"There's a child here..."

Time began to move once again and the sounds of his surroundings filled Kotarou's ears. Suddenly there were so many people shouting.

What was going on? What just happened?

His head spun, and then all of a sudden, nothing. The world went black as he lost consciousness.



When he awoke, he found himself in a plain white room lying on a plain white bed.

What happened to me?

"Ow!" A sharp pain ran through his legs as he attempted to sit up. He grimaced. His father watched

over him, a worried expression on his face.

Glancing out the window, Kotarou noticed the sun was still high in the sky. He was surprised to see his father sitting there. His father was a busy man, and hardly ever arrived home from work until quite late at night.

What about work? he wondered.

"Kotarou...you're awake...does it hurt anywhere?" his father asked, seeing Kotarou's face scrunch up in pain.

Instead of answering the question at hand, Kotarou countered with a few questions of his own. "Hey, Dad, where are we? Why are you here? It's still early, shouldn't you be at work?"

His father bit down on his lip. It was as if he was hiding something. "We're at the hospital. You were in an accident and passed out. But don't think about that now. Just get some rest, all right?"

"I see..."

He felt as if he hadn't seen his father in quite some time, and stared intently at his father's face. A face full of wrinkles. Was his father's face always so old? And his hair? It seemed whiter than before. Kotarou could not help but be taken aback by the sudden change in his father's physical appearance.

Noticing the shift in his son's expression, his father began to straighten Kotarou's blanket, lightly tapping it into place around Kotarou's collar. "You ought to get a bit more sleep," his father said. "You'll be released tomorrow."

Something was different.

"...An accident...? I was in an accident?" He couldn't remember anything. Not one thing.

I know. I'll ask Mom, he thought.

"Where's Mom?" he asked, glancing around the hospital room.

His father did not respond.

Thump, thump, thump...

Kotarou wasn't sure why, but suddenly, his heart began to race. A sick feeling filled his stomach. Something in his brain threw a warning at him. *Don't do it, Kotarou,* it told him. *You mustn't ask that question. You need to stop right now.*

Thump, thump, thump...

His pulsed quickened.

Heave, heave, heave...

He was having trouble breathing. His mind filled with doubts and worries, and his heart felt like it could jump out of his mouth any second.

It hurt, it hurt so much... Mom...

Kotarou opened his mouth, and asked the question again, slowly. "Where's Mom?"

"Mom is... She's gone. She went far, far away." His father enunciated each word slowly, clearly for him to hear. Yet, after entering Kotarou's ears, all the words did were swirl about meaninglessly in his head.

What did Father just say? She's gone? How is she gone?

"I don't...I don't understand what you're saying. Did she...go out somewhere?" he murmured.

His father took a deep breath and made a difficult face, like he'd just swallowed some bitter medicine. Suddenly, his face collapsed into tears.

"Your mother...she...she went to Heaven..." His father managed to squeeze the words from the pit of his stomach before covering his face with his hands.

Kotarou gripped the corners of his blanket in his hands. "You're lying..." *Heaven... But why?*

"It's not true. You're lying! Please tell me you're lying, Dad! Please?!" he yelled without realizing it.

His father wiped the tears from his face and knelt by the bed, close to Kotarou's pillow. He placed a large hand over Kotarou's, and said, "It's true... Your mother...your mother...is gone..."

"You're lying! I won't believe it! Not one bit!

Mom was right next to me!! She was holding me tight just a second ago! You're lying! It's not true!"

Not knowing what to do with all the emotions he was suddenly confronted with, Kotarou threw his pillow at his father. Then he took the tissue box next to his pillow and threw that as well.

"It's not true! I won't believe you! Mom?! Mom! Mom!! Where are you, Mom?!" he cried as he threw his fists about wildly. He mumbled the words over and over in his rage.

And as Kotarou raged, his father placed his arms around him and held him tight...and cried.

After a little while, Kotarou fell limp against his father's chest. His mind was empty and, in a daze, he simply stared out of the hospital's open window and into the sky.

The rays of the sun reflected brightly off one of the towering buildings visible through the window.

It's another clear day today... Kotarou turned the thought over. He could hear the hustle and bustle of the outside world. The sounds of chitter chatter—laughing, happy voices drifting on the breeze. That had been his world once, but now, it seemed so far away.

Suddenly, he heard the faint screech of a braking car.

And his mind went blank.

Flash, flash, flash. It happened all over again.

His mother's voice, the sound of the truck's brakes, being thrown off to the side...

"WAAAAHHHHHHH?!!"

He clamped both hands against his head and threw himself against his bed. He didn't want to remember.

Mom!

But he knew the truth. He knew all along she was gone.

And he knew the last smile she smiled at him was her way of saying goodbye.

He drew the covers over his head...and he cried.



What little he remembered of the events that followed was shrouded by the faded blur of a dream.

The funeral was held two days later. Kotarou sat by his father's side as rain gently rapped on them. Masses of black suits and black dresses walked by. The priest droned on and on in a language he didn't understand. There was weeping and then another mass of folks garbed in black descended upon him

and his father.

"Feel better, okay?"

"You can do it."

They all uttered worn phrases like that before they left.

Why isn't Mom here? Is that really Mom lying in that box?

No one's words made it to Kotarou's ears.

"This isn't happening. This isn't real," he repeated to himself over and over during the funeral. He couldn't shake the feeling that maybe...maybe if he kept telling himself those things, then maybe, tonight she'd come back and he'd hear her laughing voice say once again, "What would you like for dinner?"

I'm not going to believe it. She's not in Heaven. She's here. That's why I'm not going to cry, not one drop.

He glanced at his father, who sported a meek expression as he bowed his head to those that came to give their condolences. He didn't seem any different to Kotarou.

Dad must not believe it either. That Mom's gone. That's it, isn't it?

"...Are you cold, Kotarou?" his father asked as the tide of people finally ebbed.

"I'm okay. I'm fine."

"...I see. You're strong aren't you, Kotarou? But if you do get cold, you'll tell me, won't you?"

Flutter, flutter... Riding on the wind, a single petal from a cherry blossom fell softly and landed on his father's trousers.

His father gazed at the cherry tree in the temple courtyard. Kotarou followed his father's gaze. All the flowers were beginning to fall and even though the days would soon be getting warmer, the tree looked cold to him.

"We won't get to see the cherry blossoms next year with your mother..." his father mumbled as if talking to himself. He carefully plucked the petal from his pants and placed it into his jacket pocket as if it were the most precious thing in the world.

Then suddenly he stared down at his feet.

His father's shoulders trembled, as he stood there without a word. Kotarou knew he was holding back tears. The image of his father's tightly clenched fist burned itself into Kotarou's mind.

And that's when Kotarou gave up. That's when he knew.

Mom would never smile upon them again. Never.

A single tear rolled down his cheek.



Koboshi's mother brought her to the funeral.

"You remember how to do the incense properly, dear? Just do exactly what I do, okay...?"

As they lined up, her mother showed her once more how to light her incense.

"I...I got it. I got it, okay?"

Dragged through the line by her mother, Koboshi lit her incense. It was her very first time. People normally felt pretty excited about doing things for the first time but Koboshi did not feel even a twinge of excitement today.

"Mommy, is Kotarou's mommy really gone?"

"That's right. She went to Heaven. But she'll be able to watch over Kotarou from there forever," her mother explained.

Koboshi watched as she dabbed at her tears with her handkerchief. "If she went to Heaven, that means he won't get to see her again, right? Won't that make Kotarou really sad?"

"Yes, it will," her mother mumbled sadly as she gazed at Koboshi.

Koboshi looked over at Kotarou. He was sitting next to his father, staring at the floor, his mouth a tight, clenched line.

Kotarou must be sooo sad, she thought. If my mother died, I would be crying my eyes out. But he's not. He's so strong.

Just as the thought crossed her mind, she saw a single tear roll down Kotarou's cheek. He didn't even bother to wipe it away. No more followed. Koboshi was the only one who seemed to notice, and her heart grew tight.

Oh, Kotarou. If you're sad, you ought to cry, she thought. It's okay to cry. It's not shameful at all. It'll only hurt more if you keep it to yourself.

"Kotarou, when you feel down or sad, I'll be there for you," she murmured as she watched him sitting there, unmoving and unyielding as a rock. "I'll watch over and protect you. And I promise to make you a place where you can cry freely. I promise."

4

A month passed and the rainy season approached.

As a sign of the gloomy season to come, the winds were tinged with humidity.

"When the rainy season's near like this, my hair gets all flat and it's just impossible to manage," Koboshi grumbled. She tried to fix her locks with her hands as they walked to class together.

"Wow, you know stuff like that? That's really cool, Koboshi."

"Well, *durrrrh*, I'm a girl! Every girl knows that!"

Kotarou was slowly easing back into his daily routine. Going to elementary school, studying, playing with his friends... There was one difference, one huge, gaping difference. When he returned home, his mother was not there.

The room he once thought to be cramped, all of a sudden was so big and empty.

Little by little, the reality of what it meant not to have a mother began to dawn on him.

His mother's picture had been placed atop the bureau in the living room. It was the picture of the three of them at the zoo—the one they took in front of the chimpanzee cage. His mother was laughing quite hard.

It's my fault she died. My fault... If I hadn't skipped off ahead. If I had listened to her words, this would never have happened.

But she was never coming back.

Every day, he would look at that picture and say... "I'm sorry."



It was on a Sunday, when the rain fell on and off, that his father made them curry.

"I know how much you like curry, Kotarou, so I made you some. And it's not bad, if I do say so myself."

His father wasn't used to cooking, so his hands sported a myriad of band-aids. Kotarou couldn't remember his father even once stepping foot in the kitchen when his mother was around... And the curry

his father set before him must have had too much water in it, for it shook like a puddle.

"Go on, try it," his father smiled happily as he placed the curry before Kotarou.

Kotarou tried to scoop some curry up with his spoon, only to have it spill out like the rain.

"Ahh, I must have put a little too much water in it, maybe?" he muttered as he stirred the curry in the pot to test out its consistency. He laughed at his mistake.

"No you didn't," Kotarou smiled almost a little too happily, so as not to hurt his father's feelings.

His father scratched his head. "All right, next time, I promise, I'll make it loads better. So, forgive me this time...okay...?"

Kotarou took a bite for his father. It couldn't compare in the slightest with his mother's curry. For one, the potatoes were tough, almost crunchy in the middle, and two, the carrots were thrown in whole. But the biggest difference was the taste. It was a grown up's curry, and terribly spicy to him.

"How's it taste?"

"...It's good..."

"Let me see... Ahhh, this was too spicy for you, wasn't it, Kotarou? I'm sorry I couldn't make it well enough," his father mumbled.

The two stared down at their feet quietly.

At that moment, Kotarou knew the right time had come. He had to apologize. He lifted his face, determination in his eyes. "Mom...she died because of me, didn't she? But I...what should I do? How can I even begin to apologize to you?"

"Oh, Kotarou..."

His father stopped eating and stared intently into Kotarou's face. "Don't think that way," he began in a low voice. "I was worried that was how you've been feeling this whole time."

"But it's the truth! I couldn't help her. It was as if time just stopped around us...I saw everything. I knew what to do, I knew where to run and yet—!"

Kotarou clenched his jaw and fists as he fought back bitter tears.

"Do not blame yourself. It was bad luck, nothing more, nothing less. If your mother knew you blamed yourself, do you know how sad it would make her? Your mother's number one priority was your happiness and safety. So don't blame yourself, okay?"

His father placed his hand on Kotarou's shoulder and stared straight into his face. His old eyes were slightly moist with tears. Seeing that, Kotarou could no longer stop his own tears.

“But...”

“No buts. I would have done the same thing. We would and could do anything for you, Kotarou. ... And from now on, I’ll try my best, enough for your mother as well. We’ve got to both try our very best so we don’t worry your mom up in Heaven.”

Kotarou watched his father nod, as if drilling the concept into himself as well. Kotarou was speechless.

Without a word, his father pulled Kotarou’s head to his chest. Though his father suppressed his sobs as best he could, Kotarou knew the true intensity of his sadness. His father’s tears drenched the top of his head.

It is my fault after all. Dad’s so sad because Mom died in place of me. I can’t cause him any more pain.

“Dad...I’m sorry. I’ll try my best.”

“Yeah. But there may be times when you’ll find yourself alone more often. Are you going to be all right?”

“Yep. I’m gonna do my best so Mom’ll be proud of me.”

“Yes, let’s both try our best.”

The two stared at the picture atop the bureau for

some time.

And that was when Kotarou made his decision. *I've got to do better. I've got to grow up and become that adult who can eat that spicy grown-up curry. For my Dad who's here now and for my Mom up in Heaven.*

From that moment on, Kotarou changed. He didn't have to be told to pick up after himself any more—he simply tidied up by himself. And even though he was only six years old, he was slightly more grown up than his friends.

He still played and chatted with his friends, of course, but unlike Kindergarten, he stopped pulling pranks to inconvenience the teacher.

The biggest change had to be that he could not sit and watch his favorite sunset on his own any longer. The sunset... signaled the coming of the night. A night to be spent all alone. Alone in his room. No matter how many lights he put on, it was always too dark, and it scared him.

He'd never tell anyone that, of course. That he was lonely. After all, if his father knew that, he'd be worried sick about Kotarou. So he began to talk to his stuffed animals. Since his mother passed away, Kotarou had

secretly amassed quite a collection of them. The way he figured, if there were tons of stuffed animals around him, it wouldn't seem as if he were alone as much. He felt safer. Only the stuffed animals knew how he truly felt inside.

"I'm so sorry, Kotarou."

"You ought to show your mother...oh!"

Those around him tried their best to accommodate his feelings, but he found it hard to accept their kindness and awkward to be around them. Only Koboshi was different. Just like she had in Kindergarten, she created a space for him to speak freely and normally. And that made Kotarou happier than anything else.

5

Every morning at 8:30 AM, Koboshi waited patiently for Kotarou in front of the school gates. Her eyes scoured the path he normally took to school. "He should be here soon," she mumbled. Although Kotarou always put on a bright and happy façade, Koboshi knew better. She knew he had changed. And she was worried, worried beyond belief about him.

"Morning! Let's go to class together," Kotarou said with a laugh as he caught sight of her.

"Okay!"

Relief filled Kotarou's heart as he looked upon the bubbly Koboshi. In front of Koboshi, he didn't have to put on any airs. For some reason, he just forgot about being alone when he was with her.



One day, the entire class was asked to draw a

picture to be displayed during a ceremony commemorating the founding of the school.

"Kotarou's really good at drawing, you know," Koboshi boasted as if it were herself.

Their homeroom teacher smiled. "Oh really? Well then, Kotarou, do your best. I can't wait to see how it turns out."

"Yes, ma'am..."

"I'll draw with you," Koboshi grinned brightly, plopping herself down beside the quiet Kotarou.

"It's been so long since the last time I drew. I'm kinda nervous."

Kotarou seemed really happy and that made Koboshi happy. *He's slowly coming back around*, she thought, reassured.

The theme of the drawing was "Freedom." As a class, they decided to draw an image of large birds spreading their wings and flying high in the sky with the school in the background.

"Okay, then," the teacher said. "We're done with the outlining, so all we have to do now is color."

The class was divided up and each group assigned a portion of the very large paper to paint.

"Kotarou, you like the sun, don't you? Why don't you color that part?" Koboshi remarked, and

came over to stand by Kotarou. She remembered what Kotarou had told her during their Kindergarten drawing hour.

"Okay. I'll do that." Kotarou shifted from working on a section of the school building to color the round sun instead.

Suddenly he began to tremble all over. It seemed to happen the moment his fingers brushed against his favorite orange-colored crayon. He wasn't quite sure what was going on.

"What's the matter, Kotarou? Are you okay?" Koboshi asked with a worried look in her eyes.

"...It's nothing... Maybe I caught a cold... Sorry, Koboshi. Could you switch with me? I think I'm going to go home early today," he managed to get out.

Hearing his choppy, slurred words, Koboshi furrowed her brows as she looked at him. "Okay, but...do you want me to walk you home?"

"I'll be fine. Besides, I'm a boy. I can't let a girl walk me home! That's so uncool."

"I don't think you should...push yourself so much..."

"I'll be fine... I'll see you tomorrow, okay?" he said and quickly darted out of the classroom.

He couldn't stop trembling, even as he ran farther and farther from the school. Seeing that orange crayon, all the feelings he managed to suppress suddenly resurfaced. That sense of being scared. Remembering the sunrise brought that sense of being all alone.

As he ran home, he hated himself.

I'm pathetic! I wish I were dead!



The next day, Kotarou was jolted awake at dawn.

With everything that took place yesterday, he had been too excited to get a good night's sleep. His father was still asleep, so he quietly climbed out of bed and looked out the window.

I have to apologize to Koboshi for yesterday, he thought. Especially since she took over for me on that coloring assignment.

The night slowly melted into dawn. The sky was stained red. Red as blood. He had never seen so rich a red in his life.

His mother's words of wisdom echoed in his mind. *"When the sunrise is bright red...even though it looks pretty and gives you the sense it's going to be*

a clear day, it's actually quite the opposite. On days like that, it means the weather's going to turn sour on you. That's why I never do laundry on days like that. Because it's guaranteed to rain."

"...It's going to rain today...I better tell Dad not to do the laundry..." Kotarou mumbled. A wave of sadness washed over him and he began to cry. He cried uncontrollably, and all the tears he had worked so hard to hold back thundered down his cheeks.

Mom, why did you have to go away? Why did you have to save me? I wanted to go with you, Mom...to Heaven.

Kotarou continued to cry until the sunrise faded away.



"What's wrong? Your eyes are all puffy," his father asked over breakfast.

"Please come home early tonight, Dad. Please come back as soon as you can. I don't want to eat dinner alone anymore. I'm so lonely..."

He wanted to say those words to his father, but...he didn't.

"I think I might have studied too hard. Oh, by the

way, I think it's going to rain today, so don't do the laundry, okay?"

"All right. Kotarou, don't push yourself too much, okay? Well then, I'm off to work."

"Have a good day."

His father always hurried to finish his breakfast and get ready to leave. Kotarou stared at his father's back. *Please notice me, Dad...I'm right here. Please look at me.*

But Kotarou's wishes weren't heard. His father did not even turn to look back at Kotarou as he left for work.

IT CAN'T GO ON LIKE THIS!

The tenuous string that held Kotarou's reason together snapped.

"Uwwwaahhhhhh!"

A dozen unfamiliar emotions flooded Kotarou's body, turning and tossing within him.

Why do I have to put up with all this? How did all this happen?



"I am running away." That's all Kotarou wrote on the note he left on the table.

I hate Dad. He doesn't understand me at all...

Kotarou threw his wallet, handkerchief and other essentials he thought he might need into the bag with his sketchbook before bounding out of the house. He hadn't gotten far before noticing he was walking the very path he always took to school.

"God, how pathetic. I'm gonna end up at school of all places," he muttered.

For a second he thought about forgetting his plans of running away. As he gazed at the sky, he noticed gray clouds had crept into the clear sky. It looked like it was going to rain after all; he had been right about not doing the laundry.

The idea to run away came back to his mind, stronger than ever.

Why is it always me that has to worry about getting dinner ready, or about homework or cleaning the house...? Why me? With all these thoughts dancing in his head, he threw caution to the wind and ran. He wanted to be someone else, someone totally different from himself. He thought maybe, if he went ahead and did something completely out of character, his wish would come true.

Kotarou kept running. He no longer knew where he was going, and he didn't care.



“Kotarou?”

Koboshi spotted him on the road to the station, running full out. She could not help but be taken aback. His normally cool face had been replaced by a pained one that looked as if it could break into tears any moment.

What's wrong with Kotarou? Something had gone down, and she was pretty sure it wasn't something trivial.

“Wait, Kotarou! I'll go with you!” She chased after Kotarou, her eyes trained on him like a hawk so she wouldn't lose sight of him.

Pant...pant...pant...

Where am I? Kotarou wondered as he looked around. Up until now, Kotarou had never really walked anywhere but to and from school. Everything was new to him. He scanned the area around him. It was quite green.

Known as the Garden City, his hometown was quite conscious of the environment, so the city planners made sure to incorporate as much greenery in the cityscape as possible. The city at noon looked so fresh to Kotarou. It almost felt as if he was breathing

new air into his lungs.

"...Hey, Kotarou! What on Earth are you doing?"

Hearing that voice, Kotarou almost jumped.

His mother's voice?

He thought so at first, but his ears played tricks on him. As he turned around, there was Koboshi, leaning over next to him, her shoulders heaving as she tried to catch her breath.

"Koboshi...but how?"

"What do you mean how...? I saw you running down the street so I followed you, of course... *Sheesh*, you haven't changed one bit since Kindergarten, have you? Still pulling pranks, I see...do you really think it's okay to play hooky from school?"

"Of course it's okay. I've decided to run away," he said without hesitation.

"You're running away? To where?"

"Where? Well..."

He hadn't really planned that far ahead, so he stumbled for words. "What does it matter to where? Besides, you ought to be getting to school, Koboshi."

"No, I'm going to run away with you, Kotarou," Koboshi said matter-of-factly.

I can't bear to leave Kotarou to cry by himself.

"...You can't say that. That's not fair. You can't come with me," Kotarou grumbled and walked away.

"Heh heh heh. I don't care what you say. I'm coming with you. I mean, don't you think running away is *soooo* romantic? Especially when a boy and girl run away together. What do they call that again? They do it on TV. When a couple runs away together because their parents don't want them getting married? You know what I'm talking about, right? It's kinda like that, don't ya think?" Koboshi's eyes glazed over as she entered her little dream world.

"You're talking about some make-believe soap opera," Kotarou said. "But this is real life. I made a decision to run away, and I'm sticking with it!"

"What made you want to run away anyhow?" Koboshi asked.

Kotarou thought about pouring his heart out to Koboshi. He knew she would understand. But he also knew that talking to her might weaken his resolve, so he decided against it.

"I just felt like it. That's all."

"I see...how about we go on an adventure today? Just the two of us."

"I said you don't have to come."

But Koboshi showed absolutely no sign of leaving Kotarou's side today. "Say, are you getting hungry too?" she asked.

Rumble.

Kotarou's stomach began to growl. It was as if his tummy responded to her query.

Koboshi couldn't help but break into a fit of laughter. "Kotarou, that was totally uncool!"

He wanted to tell her she didn't have to laugh that hard, but seeing the tears of mirth rolling down Koboshi's cheeks, he couldn't help but laugh himself. It had been a long time since he'd laughed like that.

"Hee hee. I laughed too much, darn it!" Kotarou managed to eek out through his laughter. "Now my stomach hurts. So, what do you want to eat?"

"Lemme think. Oh, I know. There's something I always want to eat, but I never get to... Oh, there! Over there!"

Koboshi grabbed Kotarou's hand and dragged him to the shop she had in mind. It was a tiny one that sold stationary and daily necessities along with an assortment of cheap sweets.

"See? They've got *fugashi*¹ and apricot candy! I wanna try 'em both! *Ooo*, and that tube chocolate,

and, oh, that soy dusted rice cake looks so good too!!!" Koboshi exclaimed, her hands enthusiastically pointing here and there.

"You can't eat all that."

"Don't worry. Stuff like this doesn't linger in your tummy for very long." Koboshi called to the old shopkeeper. "E-excuse me, Granny, I'd like to get these, please."

Hearing Koboshi's voice, and seeing the two children before her, the shopkeeper made a dubious face. "Hmm? Shouldn't you two be in school?"

Uh oh! Kotarou thought, and got ready to bolt.

Koboshi seemed unaffected by the woman's words. "Oh, there were so many kids out sick today they decided to cancel class."

"Oh really? I didn't know there was a bug going around."

"Yeah, it's just around here, all of a sudden it seems. Well, thank you for the sweets." She smiled, deftly dodging the old woman's line of questioning.

After quickly paying for her candy, the two hurried out of the shop.

They arrived at a nearby park, unveiled their prize and began to eat their sweets.

"Wow, Koboshi, you were amazing back there. My heart was beating so fast, I thought that old lady would call us out any minute and tell the school what we were up to. But you just stayed way cool and lied right to her face. I was totally surprised!"

"I was scared out of my wits too, but we're running away, after all. I just wanted to do it right," she said as she happily licked her apricot candy.

Girls sure have guts, Kotarou thought as he licked his tube chocolate. *How am I supposed to beat that...?*

After satisfying the snarling of their stomachs, the two discussed where to head next.

"Now that I think about it, the local theatre's running an anime festival. How about we take in a movie?" Koboshi suggested, pinkie delicately tapping her chin.

"Hmm, I have a feeling the theatre owners would know right away we were playing hooky."

"You're right. Then how about...I don't know... Oh! How about the zoo?!"

"The zoo?" Kotarou was quiet. He thought he might become sad again if he visited some place so special and filled with memories of his mother.

"I think you shouldn't force yourself to not think

about your mother anymore, Kotarou. It's okay to remember. So let's go and think about all the good times you had there. Sometimes that's good for you. Besides, that place is big enough that if someone notices us we can make an easy getaway, don't ya think?"

With that, Koboshi took Kotarou by the hand and yanked him along to the train station.

Transferring once, they made their way to the zoo.

The zoo was a small private one, a local icon loved by the people since its opening. It hadn't changed one bit since he and his family last visited, and Kotarou felt a mix of sadness and relief as he gazed at it.

"Do you have any money, Kotarou?" Koboshi asked, a little worry in her voice.

Kotarou took out his wallet and peeked inside. "I've got 300 yen."

"I have 140 yen," she said as she pulled her wallet out of her backpack. "I guess I bought too much candy. I don't think we have enough to pay admission for the both of us..." she mumbled as she glumly shook her head.

"Then let's go home. No use coming here if we

don't have any money."

"You're the one that was so hardcore about running away, and now you're suggesting we go home?"

"Well...urm...yeah, but..."

"I just thought of something," Koboshi said with a grin. A stroke of genius graced her once again.

After directing Kotarou to hide close to the entryway, Koboshi made her way to the old man at the ticket booth.

What on Earth is she up to? He seriously had no idea what Koboshi was thinking anymore.

The ticket booth was a little old shack located at the entryway, watched over by one old man. Since he was alone, Koboshi reckoned if he looked away for even a moment, it would be easy enough to sneak in.

"Excuse me, sir? There's a girl about three years old over there, crying. I think she might be lost," Koboshi told the old man.

"What? Where?"

"Behind that great big tree over there...I tried to bring her over to you, but she didn't want to come with me..."

"I see. Thank you, little girl," the old man said, and made a quick dash towards the tree.

"Kotarou, hurry!"

Kotarou leapt from his hiding place. Reunited, the pair ran away from the entryway and the old man as fast and as far as they could.

"Oh man, Koboshi, you're just full of surprises today, aren't you?" Kotarou said as he caught his breath.

"It's all so thrilling and suspenseful! I'd never even think of doing anything like this normally, but today's special, just for you, Kotarou," she said with a warm smile.

"Alrighty then! Let's go see it all!"

The two of them went around the zoo and saw all the animals. From elephants to giraffes and even parrots that only lived on the tropical islands of the Pacific. Although neither of them had brought their cameras, they both pretended to pose and take pictures of each other in front of the animal cages. Out of all the animals, Koboshi's favorite was the penguins. She fished a little mirror out of her bag and reflected it against the wall. Although it was a tad mean, it was way cute to see the penguin move its head around and follow the mirror's reflection.

"Hiya there, it's the Koboshi Penguin at your service!" Koboshi said as she stiffly placed her hands by her hips and did a penguin strut.

Kotarou laughed. "You look just like a penguin. That's so funny."

Seeing his happy face, Koboshi felt herself tearing up a bit.

"What's the matter?" Kotarou asked, immediately worried.

"Oh, nothing. It's nothing at all. It's just that this morning...Kotarou...you had such a scary look on your face, but now..."

"I did? Gee, I'm so sorry for worrying you," Kotarou apologized sincerely. He hadn't wanted to come to the zoo. But now he was having so much fun and laughing like he hadn't in so long, and it was all because of her. He was so grateful to Koboshi, from the bottom of his heart.

"Well, shall we head home then?" Kotarou said with resolve.

"All done with the running away thing?"

"Nah. But I think you should go home, Koboshi."

"Oh, all right. But before we go, let's stop by the chimpanzees. Please? Kotarou?"

"O...Okay..." he mumbled, suddenly unsure of himself. He was scared how he might react in the place that held the most memories of him and his mother.

As the two approached the chimpanzee cage, one of the chimps rushed forward and bared its teeth, threatening the two of them with a howling “Ukikikiki!”

“Eww, they’re so scary!” Koboshi exclaimed.

“Don’t worry. They’re in their cage.”

“Gosh, they’re a lot more like humans than I imagined. It’s kinda...*freaky* almost. Oh, look, a baby...it’s *soooo* cute,” Koboshi mumbled. She walked closer to the cage.

“Fuga!” Uttering a strange throaty noise, one of the chimpanzees snatched a lock of Koboshi’s hair through the bars.

“Kyaah! It hurts! Help, Kotarou!”

“Hold on!”

Seeing Koboshi on the verge of tears, Kotarou quickly scanned the area. It was noon on a weekday; there was no one else around. And since they had snuck in without paying, he couldn’t very well ask one of the zookeepers for help... Kotarou stepped closer to the chimpanzee cage and tried to distract the one that had Koboshi’s hair in its grip.

“Come here. Come...here!”

But it didn’t budge, and didn’t even look at him.

I got it! Thinking he could get its attention with

food, he reached into his bag, pulled out some *fugashi* and waved it at the chimpanzee.

"Lookie! Mmm, it's mighty tasty!"

Slowly, the chimpanzee released Koboshi's hair and came over to Kotarou.

"This is for picking on Koboshi," Kotarou snapped, flicking a finger at the chimpanzee's brow.

"Kiiiiii!" The chimpanzee let out a painful shriek. Kotarou tossed the *fugashi* at the chimp.

Koboshi slumped in front of the chimp cage like a broken doll.

"Are you all right? Did it hurt you?" Kotarou helped Koboshi to her feet.

"Thanks... Awww, would you look at what it did to my hair! It's totally ruined..."

"Oh, Koboshi," Kotarou said with a giggle. *Girls are so...weird*, he thought.

"That chimpanzee must be the baby's mother. I bet she thought I was trying to steal her baby away or something," Koboshi remarked.

Kotarou nodded in agreement. "I think so too. She reacted just like my mother would."

"Oh, Kotarou...I'm so glad," Koboshi smiled happily, eyes lingering on him.

"About what?"

"You hardly ever talk about your mom anymore, Kotarou. I was really worried. I felt like...like you were trying too hard, like you were bottling everything inside. So...I brought you to the zoo on purpose. If I made you upset, I'm sorry. I'm really sorry," Koboshi said quietly.

Until now, Kotarou had no idea how much Koboshi worried about him. The revelation touched him deeply. At the same time, he felt a little embarrassed someone had seen right through him and noticed a weakness that he hadn't.

"Thank you. For worrying about me. But I'm okay now." He meant every word.

As the two sat in front of the chimpanzee cage, knees drawn into their chests, Kotarou began to talk. He talked about the time he came here with his mother.

Koboshi simply listened to Kotarou without saying a word. And just like in Kindergarten, Kotarou felt comfortable again. It was such a pleasant feeling. He felt like he could tell Koboshi anything...

Slightly, just slightly, Kotarou felt the sadness in his heart begin to lessen.

6

“Well, we should get going...” Kotarou said as he stood. He felt a lot better after sharing his memories with Koboshi. It was way past noon now, and the gray skies had darkened. “It looks like the weather’s getting bad.”

“Yeah, okay. I had a lot of fun today.”

“Me too. I’m glad you were here with me today, Koboshi. I’m really sorry about making you skip school, though. You’ll probably get in trouble, won’t you?”

Koboshi laughed brightly. “Oh, don’t worry about that. It was just one day. No big deal.”

Now they had to figure out a way to escape from the zoo without being seen by the old man at the ticket booth.

“I’ll get his attention this time, okay? You hide behind me and then run when I give the sign. We’re going to storm the front gates!”

"Oh, Kotarou, you're so manly! ♥" Koboshi said and swooned, claspng her hands in front of her chest.

"All right, ready? Let's go!" Kotarou said as the two dashed straight for the exit. Catching sight of them, the old man at the ticket booth yelled at them to stop. But hand in hand, Kotarou and Koboshi ran right by.

"Yes, we did it! We made it out!"

"But we probably can't go back any time soon, eh?"

The two looked at each other and broke into laughter.

They had barely enough time to breathe a sigh of relief when the sky turned even darker than before. The clouds drooped low, and it looked as if it could rain any second.

"The darker the sky becomes, the colder the wind gets," Koboshi said with a shiver.

"You really ought to get home, Koboshi. I'll walk you to the train station."

"What about you, Kotarou?"

"I don't know."

Rain began to fall slowly from the sky. A large, ripe drop hit Kotarou square in the face. He lifted his face to the heavens and closed his eyes.

Kotarou prayed in his heart. *Mom, can you see me from up there? Are you angry with me? Please tell me? Just give me one sign. One word.*

"I think the rain's getting worse. Say, want to stop somewhere to get away from it?" Koboshi asked as she scanned the skies.

The rain turned the gray asphalt into pitch black before their eyes.

"Oh man, you're right. Let's go find some place to hide before we get drenched..."

But there was nothing in sight. He glanced up and saw a sign, about thirty meters away, advertising a park.

"We can hide from the rain in the public bathrooms. It might smell a little, though... *Eh heh.*"

They took off towards the park.

Rumble rumble rumble!

The moment they set foot in the park, the sound of thunder echoed across the skies. A flash of lightning lit up the clouds.

"Kyaah! I'm scared, Kotarou!" Koboshi yelled, squatting down where she stood.

"Don't worry, Koboshi. I'm right here." To be

honest, Kotarou didn't care for lightning either. But as a boy, he had to stay strong and protect Koboshi.

As he reached out to her, the drizzle turned into a downpour with a waterfall-like roar. The rain came down just like the analogy the meteorologists on the news channels sometimes used—like someone upstairs overturned a big bucket of water on the world. The wind suddenly picked up and shook the greenery in the park violently. The trees took to life, their trunks writhing like maggots, their branches turned into gnarled and mangled claws that lashed out toward Kotarou and Koboshi.

"Eww, they look like ghosts," Koboshi whimpered, her voice ready to break any moment.

"Are you serious?"

In less than a breath, both Kotarou and Koboshi were soaked to the bone.

"Koboshi, here. Use this..." Kotarou took his sketchbook out of his bag and placed it over Koboshi's head. That was the best he could offer to shield her from the rain. He scolded himself inwardly for not bringing an umbrella when he suspected all along it was going to rain.

Meanwhile, Koboshi felt pretty small. How was she supposed to protect Kotarou, cowering the way she

was? Right now, she was more like an extra piece of baggage than a helping hand, she thought bitterly.

Just when she gathered enough courage to stand a bit taller, a flash of lightning drained all her resolve and sent her back to square one.

Splish splish splash...

They heard footsteps mingled with the sound of the falling rain. "Whoa, fancy seeing folks at a place like this," remarked a boy about Kotarou's age.

"...Well, you're here too, aren't you?" Kotarou returned naturally, as if they were old friends. Kotarou normally had trouble starting a conversation with people he knew, so the ease with which the words came out towards someone he didn't know was quite shocking, even to him.

"Heh, you're right. Ha ha ha! Hey, you're pretty quick with the comebacks, aren't 'cha?"

The boy flashed a big smile. In his hands, he held an oversized sports bag. His hair was silky, light brown, and his face was handsomely crafted, almost regal. He approached the two in silence, and extended his open umbrella over them.

"Thanks," Kotarou said.

Rumble rumble rumble. Thunder boomed directly over them, louder than before. The rain showed no sign

of lessening, instead falling faster and harder against the ground.

Koboshi broke into tears. "Kyaahh! Kotarou! The lightning's gonna come again!"

"Sheesh, this dinky little umbrella isn't gonna stop any of this," the boy said to the two of them. "Oh, hey, I got it. Look, I know this place we can definitely hide out from the rain. I can show you, but it's a bit of a run. Wanna go?"

"Fine. But I don't want to run a few kilometers in this mess."

"Nah, it's really close..."

"Really? Well, what are we waiting for then," Koboshi said, rather agitated. One thing was sure; she couldn't bear to stay here any longer.

"By the way, my name's Takashi. It's spelled like the character 'Ten' for 'Heaven.' Nice to meetcha. So, what about you guys?"

He tapped a finger against his forehead like a half salute, and under a single umbrella, a round of introductions began.

"I'm Kotarou Higuchi ..."

"And I'm Koboshi Uematsu."

"Koboshi...Uematsu? What a weird name. Do you get that a lot? Uematsu?" he said jokingly.

"Oh my gosh, rude much? I'm not the one named 'Ten.' If you wanna talk weird, why don't you talk about that? *Pbbbbtt!*" Koboshi stuck out her tongue at Takashi.

"Whoa, kitten's got claws. A little spitfire, are ya? That's cool. Nice to meetcha, Uematsu."

He laughed happily before thrusting the umbrella at her. "Here, you use this."

"But...you guys will get wet then?"

"Don't worry, we're both men. What's a little rain... right, Kotarou?"

"Yeah. Don't worry about us guys."

Kotarou? Already? We've just met and already this boy is calling me by my first name? Kotarou thought, rather taken aback. He glared at Takashi, jaw clenched. There was a fine line between being easygoing and tactless.

"Thanks. Then I'll borrow it," Koboshi said, accepting the umbrella from Takashi.

"Awright, then gimme that," Takashi said, grabbing hold of her backpack. "It'll get in your way when you're running,"

Despite Koboshi's protests that she could carry it herself Takashi persisted, and tried to tug the backpack from her.

“*Ugh*, would you just quit it?!” Koboshi yanked the backpack back as hard as she could. Perhaps a little too hard.

BAMM!

As she pulled it back, the bottom smacked Takashi square in the face. “Owww! Holy cow! Did ya have to do that? Seriously?!”

“Oh my gosh, I’m so sorry! I didn’t mean to do that! Oh no, are you all right?!” Koboshi asked, panicked, as she peered into Takashi’s face.

“Nah, don’t worry, that ain’t nothin’. Anyhow, let’s head out, shall we?” And with that, Takashi began to run. Kotarou and Koboshi followed behind.

Takashi and crew ran towards a mountain that rose up deep within the park. They took a brisk, five-minute climb up one of the park’s nature trails that led to the mountain peak and, halfway up, came to a gazebo. Made of large round logs, the gazebo was bigger than it appeared from the bottom of the mountain, covering an expanse about the size of Kotarou’s living room. Although it was only comprised of support pillars and a roof, that was more than enough to shield them from the rain.

Kotarou and Koboshi took a seat on the chairs in the center of the gazebo, and placed their soaked

bags at their feet.

"This is like a rest area for people climbing the mountain... Of course, it's more of a hill than a mountain if you ask me," Takashi explained as he leaned against one of the support pillars.

"Thanks for bringing us here. Now we don't have to get soaked. You're a real lifesaver. Thanks, Ten-chan...and I'm really sorry for hitting you in the face with my bag before," Koboshi apologized shyly.

"Like I said, no worries. But...what's up with calling me 'Ten-chan,' huh?"

"Well, you said your name was Takashi, like the character for 'Heaven.' So I thought it would be fitting to call you 'Ten-chan.'"

"It's kinda girly," Takashi grumbled with a smidge of discomfort on his face.

"Oh, I don't think so. I think it's kinda cute. A *great* nickname, if I do say so myself."

"Really?" Takashi said, his discomfort replaced by a touch of embarrassment.

Kotarou couldn't help but laugh out loud. Obviously, Takashi wasn't like anyone Kotarou ever met before. He was quite funny to watch.

"Hey, did you just look at me and laugh?"

"I did not!"

“Liar!”

Kotarou was surprised at Takashi's quick perception. Casually, he glanced over at Koboshi. She had drawn her arms around herself closely.

“Are you cold, Koboshi...?”

Koboshi nodded.

“Here, use this,” Takashi said, producing a towel from his sports bag and handing it to her.

“It's okay. You use it, Ten-chan.”

“My motto is to take care of the ladies, so you use it... It might be a bit sweaty though.”

“Kya!” Koboshi squeaked, ready to throw the towel away.

“I'm kidding. It's a joke... *Sheesh*, you didn't have to react like that.”

The three laughed.

Although perhaps a little too easygoing, Takashi seemed like a good guy, Kotarou thought. Even though they just met him, his bright vibe took both him and Koboshi in right away, breaking through their barriers with ease. It was as if they were dear old friends. He felt as if just being next to Takashi conferred an extra bit of energy and spirit on him.

“Gosh...the view is so beautiful from up here,” Koboshi said happily. Below them, clouds hid away the

cityscape, but in its place they left an ethereal scene, as if they were standing above the clouds.

Kotarou was sure that if the weather cleared up, the entire city would sprawl out before them in miniature.

"Ain't it? This nature trail's been here forever, but not a lot of folks come up here. The view is really awesome, though. I guarantee if you came up here during the cherry blossom season, you'd be moved to tears," Takashi proudly announced, as if it were his own backyard.

But Kotarou's thoughts had drifted to another place. He would never be able to view the cherry blossoms again with his mother... The words his father said to him the day of the funeral came back and with them, the feelings of agitation he felt earlier when he first made the decision to run away. *Maybe it's me. Maybe I'm just not right today.*

Not noticing the downturn in Kotarou's spirits, Takashi and Koboshi continued to chatter away merrily.

"We should come back here when the weather's nicer, don't you think? Kotarou?"

"I'm telling you, this place is the best. It's just great up here. Sometimes when I just want to chill out, I come up here by myself and stare at the scenery. It's

kinda like my secret place, but I guess I'll make an exception for today..."

After flashing a wide grin at Koboshi, Takashi turned to face the now quiet Kotarou, a concerned expression on his face. "Kotarou?"

Unexpectedly hearing his name, Kotarou jumped a bit. "Wha...?"

"You got all quiet all of a sudden. I thought you might have fallen asleep... Anyhow, I have a question." He paused. "What's up between you two?"

"Wh-what's up...? Between *us*...?"

The bluntness of the question took Koboshi by surprise and left her at a loss for words. She blinked nervously, heart a-flutter, and glanced at Kotarou.

"What's up is that we've been friends since Kindergarten," Kotarou answered without hesitation.

For a moment, Koboshi's shoulders slumped. *Ahh, what a shock. So Kotarou only thinks of me as a friend?*

"Oh yeah? It's just that I got the sense that Uematsu was *totally* into you, and you're both obviously ditching school, which...combined with you getting all serious every so often, I figured you two might have run off together or somethin'."

Takashi flashed another brilliant grin at Koboshi.

That boy is as sharp as a tack, Koboshi thought as she quickly stared at her feet, her face bright red.

"Yeah, right. As if," Kotarou snapped, not noticing Koboshi's reaction. "We're just in the middle of running away, is all!"

"Running away?"

"I mean, just me. Not Koboshi. She's got nothing to do with it."

"But running away... Did something bad happen?" Takashi asked.

"I don't think I need to explain myself to you."

"I don't think I need to explain myself to you," Takashi mimicked before shrugging his shoulders. "Look, you can drop the cool act already. I bet you're the type that usually doesn't say what he wants to say, aren't you? That's why you end up having to run away from home."

"It's not like that," Koboshi said vehemently. "Kotarou's got a lot going on in his life right now, so he's just feeling a little down is all. He just wanted a change of pace. And for your information, Kotarou is just great! He can cook and he even cleans on his own. My mom always says how wonderful he is—and how I should follow his example."

With Koboshi defending him so passionately,

Kotarou had little room to interject.

"*Sooo*, Kotarou's a good little boy, is he...?" Takashi said, just a little snidely.

Something in Kotarou snapped. "Don't call me a good boy! I don't want to be a stupid good boy!" he exploded.

Both Koboshi and Takashi's eyes widened.

"Kotarou, what's wrong? You're not acting like yourself."

All the feelings, all the stress and agitation that had built up inside him were all unleashed at once.

"What do you mean, 'not acting like myself'? What exactly *is* that? Please, do tell, because lately, I don't even know who I am anymore. I've been doing so much so I don't worry my dad. But no one ever sees the real me! Not even my dad—and he's right there!"

The thought crossed his mind that he should stop, but the words just came pouring out, as hard, as unrelenting, and as unending as the rain that fell around him.

Kotarou knew he wasn't angry with Koboshi or Takashi—he knew he was just taking out his anger on them. But he couldn't stop himself.

He talked about how much it hurt to lose his mother. He talked about how badly he cut himself when he

was cooking one day, and how helpless he felt as the blood drained from his fingertips. He told them about how at night, when his father wasn't yet home, he'd turn on all the televisions and radios in the house and wait patiently, even though it scared him so much to be alone. He told them about not being able to say or do anything when he'd catch his father crying in the middle of the night, staring at his late wife's picture... He didn't know what to do anymore. Was this how it was going to be forever...?

He told them about everything that came to mind. And though he expected to be able to speak so freely in front of Koboshi, for some reason, he was able to do the same with Takashi, whom he had just met. He felt as if he was going to explode. He was compelled by this urging, this yearning inside him, so he continued to speak.

As he spoke, Takashi listened, taking in the scenery around him. Koboshi's hand was clamped tight around Kotarou's. Neither one of them said a word.

Once he had gotten everything off his chest, Kotarou was silent as well. Somewhere along the line, he began to cry. Takashi walked over to Kotarou and nonchalantly offered him a handkerchief. "You're a poser, man. You're trying too hard to be something

you're not."

"Ten-chan, how can you say that?" Koboshi snapped angrily.

Kotarou took a step back, not at all expecting Takashi's words.

Takashi continued. "You put on these airs...you want everyone around you to think you're all cool and unaffected. But it's all an act, isn't it?"

"How dare you?! I never thought that way. Not once!" Enraged, Kotarou grabbed a handful of Takashi's shirt.

"But it's the truth. That's what I get out of your little spiel."

"How can you say that? Kotarou just doesn't want to worry his father, that's all!" Koboshi said, on the verge of tears.

Hearing the quaver in Koboshi's voice, for a second it seemed as if Takashi's expression softened, but it wasn't enough to stop him from glaring at Kotarou, who had his shirt in a death grip.

"Man oh man, am I jealous. Wish I had a girl sticking up for me like that."

"Like a jerk like you could ever understand how I feel!" Kotarou shouted. He pushed Takashi away.

"Oh yeah? Like I want to understand anyone's

feelings! Especially the feelings of a posing little goodie two-shoes like you!" Takashi yelled, pushing Kotarou back.

"Shut up!"

"You shut up!"

They grabbed one another, and soon were on the ground, immersed in an all-out tussle.

"Both of you, stop it!" Koboshi cried, shuffling back and forth fretfully. "You were getting along so well just now... I can't believe you two!"

"You stupid faker!"

"Screw you!"

They were at each other's throats, rolling across the ground as they exchanged insults.

"Oh my gosh! They're not stopping! They're both going to end up all bloody if I don't do something quick!" Koboshi thought to cry for help, but given the downpour, there was no one around.

"I know. The rain... I'll use the rain against them," she said under her breath.

She took Takashi's towel and placed it under the rainwater that poured down from the gazebo's roof.

Kotarou and Takashi continued their wrestling match. They were beginning to tire themselves out, their shoulders sagging and their breathing heavy.

“...You’ve got guts. I’ll give you that,” Takashi said, as Kotarou was about to leap at him again. His tone and demeanor were completely different than before.

Confused by the sudden change, Kotarou held his fist back, and stared into Takashi’s face. “It’s a little late for compliments now, don’t you think? I’m still gonna beat you into a pulp,” Kotarou lied. In all honesty, he was beat. He could barely lift his arms anymore, and even talking was a chore.

Takashi grinned. “*Heh*, you’re all right in my book, Kotarou...” he said, slowly pushing Kotarou’s hands away. He climbed to his feet, and began to dust the dirt from his pants.

Kotarou’s mouth gaped in amazement as Takashi spoke.

“I do understand how you feel, Kotarou. I know what it’s like to want to be cool. Sometimes a man needs to put on airs.”

“Wait a sec. Didn’t you just berate me two seconds ago...?”

“Well, yeah. But sometimes it’s better if you just let it all out, right? Like you did just now. Sometimes you need to just let it all go—everything you want to say...everything you feel. You can’t keep all that bottled up inside or else you’ll just crack. Right, Kotarou?”

"Are you saying that you said those things on purpose...?" Kotarou trailed off, completely blown away by Takashi's words.

"Who knows... To be honest, I was feeling pretty cruddy too. I just got blamed for doing something I didn't do, so maybe I was lookin' for a fight, to blow off some steam. Anyhow...sorry, man," Takashi said, rubbing the tip of his nose sheepishly.

Suddenly, Koboshi charged at the two of them, armed with a towel ripe with rainwater.

"Awright, you two, that's enough!!" she demanded, swinging the water-logged towel at them like she would a pair of nunchakus. As the towel cut through the air, water leapt at the two boys. They knew all too well that a wet towel made a dangerous weapon.

Kotarou and Takashi forgot their exhaustion and did their best to dodge her deadly towel.

"Koboshi, we stopped fighting already," Kotarou yelled. Takashi pressed his hands together as if to pray for mercy.

Then, in unison, they cried, "We're sorry for fighting! We promise we won't do it again!"

Koboshi stopped dead in her tracks. "Huh? You're all done?"

"Yeah, we're done," Kotarou said. "You scared

me there, Koboshi.”

“Thank goodness, it’s over,” Tokashi added. “But, man, you’re crazy, aren’tcha? We don’t have any girls in our class like you for sure. So manly. So...”

Kotarou nodded. “Yeah, she’s totally like one of the guys.”

Kotarou and Takashi exchanged glances and started to laugh. Koboshi stared at them, not sure what to make of the situation.

“Are you guys serious? That’s not fair. You guys totally scared me. I thought I’d come back and you’d both be drenched in blood.” Seeing they had really worked out their differences, Koboshi slumped to the ground, drained. “Haahhh...”

“I’m really sorry. It was my fault,” Kotarou apologized.

“Nah, a lot happened and we both had our reasons. At least we came to an understanding,” Takashi countered.

Looking into their faces, Koboshi could see they were truly sorry and finally allowed herself to breathe again. “Seriously, you guys, that *so* wasn’t cool. You boys are so violent and impulsive. First you’re fighting, then you’re laughing. I just don’t get you two. You’ll be an eternal mystery to us girls for sure,” Koboshi

grumbled, and she had the feeling she was quite right.

"Well, you girls are just as much a mystery to us," Takashi said with a hearty laugh.

"Hey, Kotarou, how are you feeling? Better?"

"Yeah, a little," Kotarou said, smiling.

"Wow wee, Ten-chan! You just met Kotarou, but you seem like you know him so well."

"Heh heh. I just thought maybe we ain't that much different, is all."

"Yeah right. As if," Kotarou quickly rebuffed.

Scowling, Takashi punched him in the shoulder. Kotarou just laughed it off.

"Gosh, I feel like I worried about you guys for nothing. But, it's been so long since I've seen you laugh like that, Kotarou."

She wasn't entirely sure about what had transpired between the two boys, but in less than an instant, they were able to understand and accept one another. Koboshi couldn't help but feel just a bit envious of this frank form of friendship between boys.

As they waited for the rain to stop, Kotarou, Koboshi and Takashi talked about countless different things. Things they had trouble telling others...and stuff they carried deep within their hearts...

"...I'm not very smart, and I'm a complete klutz.

On top of that, I'm ugly too...and it gets really discouraging sometimes... I feel like, no matter how hard I want something, it'll never come true." With her self-degrading words, Kotarou gazed deeply into Koboshi's eyes.

"You're always so chipper, Koboshi. And I think that's great about you. I think it's difficult being so optimistic all the time, but you pull it off like a pro. Because of that, I'm so glad we're friends."

"From what I hear, the thing about dreams is that if you keep wishing, they'll eventually come true. So don't give up on whatever it is you want, Uematsu. If you keep on believing, it'll happen for you," Takashi said with a cheesy grin on his face.

"You stole that straight off a TV show, didn't you?"

"Heh heh, you got me. But seriously, though, that's what I believe."

"Thanks, guys. I feel a lot better after talking to you two. I guess it's good to get stuff off your chest sometimes. And it's all because we met you, Ten-chan."

Kotarou nodded in agreement. "Definitely."

"Aww, shucks. You guys are making me blush."

"Since we're on the subject, Ten-chan. Is there



something bothering you too?" Koboshi asked of Takashi curiously.

"Even if there was, I wouldn't tell. That's what being a man's all about... Ain't that right, Kotarou?"

"You're so strong, Ten-chan. Meanwhile, I'm such a..."

"Oh, stop it. Don't get all introspective on me. This time was special, remember? If you think what you're doing is right, then believe it is. You think too much, Kotarou. And when you think, you keep it all to yourself, so you end up exploding."

"He's right, Kotarou. You just don't say enough. It wasn't like that back in Kindergarten."

"Really? Have I changed that much?" he asked meekly. Hearing the same thought echoed by the both of them was quite discouraging.

"No, silly. Just a little," Koboshi said, placing her hand on his shoulder. "Maybe no one else noticed...but I did. More importantly though, the real you, the real Kotarou is still there. And he's kind, with a strong heart..."

"Woo. That's deep. Way to go, childhood friends," Takashi hooted.

Kotarou glared at Takashi as if to say, "It's not like that."

"Oh man, I can't tell if he's on the ball or way thickheaded," Takashi muttered to himself as he scratched his head in confusion.

7

“Oh, look!” Koboshi shouted suddenly, as the three sat around relaxing. She pointed at the skyline.

“Look! Look! The rain’s stopped... And the sunset...it’s amazing!”

None of them noticed the rain had let up. Koboshi stepped from the gazebo and took in the sunset before her. Kotarou and Takashi looked up with a “Wow!” They gathered around Koboshi, their eyes on the sky above.

The rain had stopped quite a while back it seemed, the dingy gray replaced with a vibrant blue. As they stared, large pieces of orange began to nibble at the corners of the blue, heralding the sunset.

“Wow, it feels so nice right now.”

“Yeah. Even the wind’s warmed up. It’s so refreshing,” Kotarou added as he gazed into the heavens.

Takashi gave a big stretch. “But, man, did it ever seem like a long day today.”

For a few more moments, the three stood there, their eyes fixed upon the brilliant, bright, orange sunset.

It had been such a long time since Kotarou watched an entire sunset. Not since his mother passed away. He had been scared of it all that time. Now he felt as if a weight had been lifted.

It's all right. I'm me. I don't have to fake it or hold it in. I can draw the sun again with my favorite orange crayons. I'm sure of it.

"So, you still plan on running away?" Takashi asked, looking straight into Kotarou's face.

Kotarou laughed. "Nah. I'm done. I think I did enough of it today."

Beside him, Koboshi let out a short sigh of relief. "Then I'll cancel my plans to run away too."

"Hey, it's getting a bit late, so maybe you two ought to get on home. Especially Uematsu. She is *technically* a girl after all." As barbed as the comment was, Takashi was a gentleman to the end.

Koboshi crossed her arms over her chest. "You were doing fine until the 'technically' part."

"Oh...*crud*. I was supposed to run an errand. I gotta get going, guys. See ya!" Takashi grabbed his umbrella and bag and headed back down the mountain path.

"Wait! Hold on, Ten-chan!"

By the time they got the words out, Takashi had already disappeared into the park. Kotarou and Koboshi lingered in front of the gazebo for a moment longer.

"We should get going too," Koboshi said.

"Yeah."

Feeling just a bit bewildered, the two began their descent.

"That Ten-chan sure was a strange kid," Koboshi said.

"Yeah. But he was a good guy too."

"Oh no, I forgot to give him back his towel. I wonder if we'll ever see him again."

"All we have is his name. But maybe if we come back here, he'll pop up again."

"You think? Yeah, I think so too. Maybe he'll like, jump down from a random tree branch and say 'hi' or something," Koboshi joked as she looked back at the mountain where they spent their afternoon.

Kotarou did the same. He felt as if the rains had washed away all the agitation and anxiety he felt this morning.

Ten-chan, eh...? Ten like the character for "Heaven." Maybe he was a friend my mother sent to lift my

spirits, Kotarou thought.

They took the train back to their stop. It was quite dark now, and the marketplace was packed with housewives shopping for fresh ingredients for dinner.

"...Koboshi..."

"Huh?"

"I wanted to say...*thanks*."

"What's the matter all a sudden?" Koboshi asked, her heart flutter at Kotarou's sudden serious tone.

"Well, I was really feeling and acting strange today. But thanks to you two, I had so much fun and feel so much better. Cleansed, almost."

"I see. Then it's all good. Besides, I haven't been to the zoo in ages and I got to go again today, so let's just say we're Even Steven. But, Kotarou..."

"What?"

"Next time, if there's something bothering you, will you tell me right away? Especially before you think about running away again."

"All right. I'll do that."

The two were quiet for a moment. But it was a good, comfortable silence.

This mood, Koboshi thought to herself. *Could it be God is giving me a second chance? Maybe I should tell him how I feel about him. Yes, that's what I'll do,*

Koboshi decided.

She took in a large breath and braced herself. "I want you to know that no matter when or what, I'll protect..."

But Kotarou wasn't listening. He had run off.

"Huh? Kotarou? What's the matter?"

"Sorry, Koboshi! But I forgot, there's a special vegetable sale today, so I gotta take advantage of it. It's almost over, so I'll see you tomorrow, okay? Thanks again!!"

And with that, Kotarou darted out of sight.

"Oh my gosh, the nerve! I was just coming to the important part! Oh, Kotarou. *Hmmph!*" With a big sigh, Koboshi headed home.

Oh well. Kotarou and I made a special memory together today. It wasn't just between the two of us unfortunately, but still, it was wonderful.

Koboshi stared into the newborn night sky. The stars had just begun to twinkle. Suddenly, she spotted a long-tailed star, shooting across the dark canvas.

A shooting star! I need to make a wish, quick. Please let me be friends with Kotarou forever and ever.

As if in response to Koboshi's wish, the star winked brightly.



"Excuse me! May I get a carrot, an onion, and a potato, please?" Kotarou asked of the old man presiding over the sale at the green grocers'.

"You betcha, Kotarou. Boy, are you spunky today. Just for that, how about I throw in an extra potato!"

The man handed Kotarou a paper bag with his big, calloused hands.

"Thanks!" Kotarou finished his tour of the marketplace and walked home carrying a large plastic bag of groceries.

The room was pitch black when he returned, but today, he wasn't scared.

"I'm home, Mom." As he greeted his mother's picture, he felt as if she smiled in return. "All right, I'm gonna do it today."

Kotarou put on an apron and headed towards the kitchen. The sounds of a knife tapping against a cutting board resounded through the house. Each tap was light and bouncy, as if it reflected Kotarou's heart.

"I'm home."

"Welcome home, Dad," Kotarou called a greeting as he ran into the entryway.

"Hmm? You sure are lively today. Did something

good happen?" his father asked, a bit surprised. He hadn't seen such a bright smile on his son's face in some time now.

"No, not really..."

"I see." His father laughed as he looked into Kotarou's face. Kotarou felt as if he hadn't seen his father smile in a long time.

After changing out of his work clothes, Kotarou's father came into the living room, sniffing the air. "...Oh, we're having curry today, are we? It smells good...and I'm famished."

"Dad..." For a second, Kotarou considered telling him about what happened today. He wanted to say that something good happened. That he made a new friend. But...he decided against it. Not yet anyhow. For now, he'd keep the day's adventure to himself. He'd put it away in the secret treasure box of his heart...and whenever he felt lonely or sad again, he'd sneak a little peek at this rich recollection and remember...and he wouldn't feel as blue anymore.

"What's wrong?"

"There *was* something good. I just remembered."

"Oh? And what was that?"

"I did a good job with my curry today. As good

as Mom's even..." Kotarou beamed.

"Oh yeah? As good as you mother's, eh? Well then, I can't wait to try it..."

My son's all grown up, Kotarou's father thought proudly, a broad grin on his face.

From that day on, Kotarou returned to his bright and lively self. Of course, there were still times he got sad or felt lonely. But whenever that happened, he'd just think about the beautiful sunset he watched at the end of that rainy day. And just as the sky had cleared, so too had his heart. *I'm fine just the way I am.*



Ever since that rainy day, Kotarou and Koboshi went to the park to see Takashi. They played together a few times, but because their houses were so far away, through the years, those times became less and less. That is, until one day, four years later...

Kotarou and Koboshi were in the fifth grade when a surprising turn of events took place.

"Today I'd like to introduce you all to a transfer student," their teacher announced. She presented the class with none other than...

"Oh my gosh, Ten-chan?!"

"Are you serious?!!"

Both Kotarou and Koboshi remained standing, rooted in place and utterly speechless. Although they hadn't seen each other in a while, Ten-chan's silky hair and face hadn't changed a bit.

"Yo! Hey, Kotarou, Uematsu. I see you two are still stuck together like glue."

Just like on the day they first met, he tapped his finger against his forehead, and sent them his trademark greeting before he said, "I knew I'd see y'all again one day."

That was their second first meeting.

On that day, Kotarou, Takashi and Koboshi began the second chapter of their friendship, and it still continues to this day. Great friends since day one, Kotarou and Takashi became even better friends. In the sixth grade, Koboshi waited for Kotarou in front of the school gates at 8:30 AM every morning. And although they never said it out loud, they knew in their hearts they were all dear friends.

Then, now, and forever...

But to think, Ten-chan's the most popular kid in school now...? Unbelievable!

One morning, Kotarou and Koboshi walked side by side on their way to school, reminiscing a bit. Suddenly, Takashi appeared from behind. He ran up to them.

"Yo, Kotarou. What are you smirking about this time? Didn't I tell you to say what's on yer mind?"

"All right, all right. Here I go. 'Ten-chan is a big meanie...'"

"Wha?!"

"You told me to say what was on my mind, didn't you?"

"That ain't what I meant!"

Koboshi grinned. "No, I concur with Kotarou."

"That's right!"

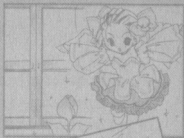
"Hey! Quit horsing around and get to your classrooms! The bell's about to ring!" the P.E. teacher scolded. The teacher's thunderous yell reminded the three they were on a collision course with tardiness.

"Crud, let's get moving!"

"Yeah."

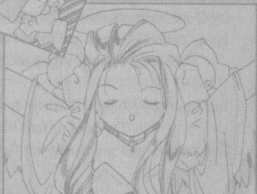
"Run!"

White clouds popped against a dark blue sky. And the sun's rays shone brightly upon the three laughing friends, enveloping them in a warm glow.



STORY 2

How to Laugh It Up in Heaven



1

“I wonder if that girl’s as big a failure as before.”

“Actually, from what I hear, she’s had plenty of chances to take the Angel Examination. She just doesn’t follow through.”

“Is that so? Then again, I suppose it’s not so strange coming from an angel who did *that*...”

In the Western Quarter of Heaven, where the angels lived, a few angels gathered to gossip about a certain somebody. Yes, they were angels but even angels liked a little gossip now and then.

“If you ask me, the way she’s going, she’ll end up in hot water—” Looking up in mid-sentence, the third angel swallowed the rest of her words. Another angel appeared before her, an angry scowl on her face.

“Sasha...”

Sasha scowled at them. “Would you mind not discussing things like that so loudly?”

“W-we’re sorry,” the gossiping angels said and

forced smiles onto their faces. With a whoosh of feathers, they took to the skies and darted off.

The angel named Sasha commanded a great deal of respect from those around her and not just for her fashion sense, though it was hard to ignore her taste in Heavenly fashions. Sasha wore her trademark white, one-piece super mini skirt dress with a giant V-neck, plus a pair of lace-up boots, and, for some reason, she adorned her lovely locks with ribbons and *teru teru bozus*².

"Oh well, it's the truth, so I suppose they can't help themselves, but...as her older sister, I can't just let them say whatever they please," Sasha grumbled as she gazed upon the rainbow river that flowed through the field of flowers that bloomed at the center of Heaven. "Seriously, what is with that girl? If she put even a little bit of effort into things, I'm sure she'd be able to do quite well."

From the direction of the river, an odd laughter echoed. "Tee hee hee hee hee."

"That girl...don't tell me she's forcing herself to laugh again," Sasha frowned. She hopped on a passing cloud and curled up amid its fluffy softness. "Oh well, no use in me getting all stressed out about it. Time for a nap!"

And with that, Sasha fell into a deep sleep.



On the banks of the rainbow river, five angels sat trying to come up with a game to play together.

“How about we shoot some stars?” one suggested.

“Sounds okay, but I’m not very good...”

The angels laughed gleefully together and aimed their fingers at the stars above, practicing their aim.

Sssh.

One by one, a bright white light extended from each angel’s finger tips and stretched into the beyond.

Whooshh.

As one of the light beams hit a star, it began to twinkle, just a little.

“Aww, it wasn’t enough.”

“D’oh, I totally missed... I still can’t get it to go where I want.”

All the angels concentrated on shooting their beams of light. To the angels, star shooting was a very tough, very important technique to master. People on Earth often found comfort looking into a starry sky.

In the hopes that those who were lonely or sad would find the solace they sought, the angels would shoot at the stars to brighten their twinkle. It was believed the stars' twinkle had the power to spread a sense of kindness into the soul of whoever gazed upon it, to seed the want and will to try again tomorrow, or to turn bitter tears into warm hope. The starry sky was an encouraging whisper from the angels that said, "Try your best!" Mastery over the art of star shining was considered the truest test of an angel.

"I still can't do it~su. I haven't learned how to make a pretty witty beam of light yet~su," one of the angels said, grinning sheepishly at her fingertips. Her name was Misha.

Although the angels around her were dressed in white robes and dresses, Misha wore a black, one piece dress and a single bunny clip accessory in her hair. Among the white clad company, her black clothing stood out starkly. In fact, the only thing remotely angel-like about Misha were her bright white socks.

Seeing her, the eyes of those around her welled up with pity.

"That's right...you haven't been taught how to shoot stars yet, have you, Misha? I'm sorry."

"Well, then I suppose we'll just have to play

without her. *Fu fu fu*, I love being able to do such fun things..."

"I hope you learn how by the next time we get to play together, Misha."

"I'll try my best~su... Tee hee hee hee hee."

So as not to show the other angels how badly she felt, Misha forced a smile. And then with a big sigh of resignation, she slowly hobbled from the circle of gathered angels, and towards the riverside.

Misha both was and wasn't an angel—she was an incomplete, broken being.

Many years ago, she had done something terribly taboo for an angel and her standing had been dropped even lower than the lowest rung of angel society. That was why she still had not been bestowed with the ability to twinkle the stars.

"Tee hee hee. No one wants to play with me~su. It's probably because I'm so stupid~su."

Misha sat upon the river's edge and watched the other angels shine the stars for a little while. "Ahhh, I wish something good would happen~su... *Oooh!* A pretty Mr. Butterfly!" she squealed suddenly and jumped to her feet to chase a purple butterfly fluttering about the rainbow river.

"I wonder if I'll be able to fly just like you one

day~su, Mr. Butterfly.”

As if to console her, the butterfly began to dance delicately around Misha’s face.

“Tee hee hee hee hee! That tickles~su!”

With her laughter, the white light that bathed the heavens pulsed stronger and brighter. The entire riverbank was immediately illuminated.

The other angels began to whisper among themselves again.

“Oh my, it’s so bright all of a sudden. That Misha must be laughing again.”

“She’s always so happy, for being what she is. But...that light does make me feel so warm inside.”

If Misha felt sad or said she “felt like crying~su,” a heavy rain would fall in the heavens alongside her tears.

“Misha must have done something naughty again. She’s so emotional, that girl.”

“She’s just not cut out to be an angel.”

The rumors concerning Misha never stopped. It was precisely because Misha could not grasp the idea of being an angel that everyone was so curious about her. She was the worst angel Heaven had ever seen, and yet, the center of its attention.

“*Fuuu*. It’s so boring being all alone~su,” Misha

sighed as the butterfly flew away and over the other bank of the river. She waved goodbye, and then, as she often did, sat back down at the edge of the rainbow river and stared at her own reflection in the water.

She really didn't like looking at her own reflection. But her subconscious egged her on and before she knew it, she'd find herself peering into the river again.

More than anything, Misha hated her reflection. Outside, her eyes looked vacant, and a forced, fake smile was perpetually plastered across her lips. On the inside, a deep sadness filled her heart.

Is this how it has to be? Maybe the others are right. Maybe I'm not meant to be an angel. Maybe it would be better off for everyone else if I were dead.

Normally, Misha put on a smiling face and laughed with a "tee hee hee" when speaking to others. But deep inside, it was a whole other story, and her heart was always crying. As if mirroring her feelings, a light rain began to fall.



"Oh goodness. She's feeling down again. I swear, that girl's such a handful," Sasha grumbled, half-asleep, as a drop of rain fell against her cheek.

She rubbed her eyes awake and then, as always, flew to the rainbow river where she knew she would find Misha.

"Sacchan..."

"Misha! Why are you crying *again*?!"

"I'm not cryin'~su. Tee hee hee hee hee hee. I'm laughin'~su!" she said with a big, forced, aberration of a smile.

"Oh, stop that! It's getting old. You know you don't have to put on an act in front of me."

"Thanks, Sacchan." Misha wiped the smile off her face, picked up a small pebble, and threw it into the rainbow river with a dull splash.

Sasha was worried Misha would be expelled from the heavens if she kept on as she was. As Misha's big sister, she had to do something to get Misha to try harder, to want to excel.

In order to become a full-fledged angel like Sasha, angels had to take an Angel Advancement Examination. The test was used to determine an angel's specific quality or specialty. Furthermore, an angel had to truly promote their aspirations and "want" to take the test, or else they wouldn't be granted permission to do so.

Sasha had tried in the past to convince Misha to take the test, but each attempt had ended up with Misha

losing confidence in herself and giving up.

"I don't deserve to become an angel~su," she'd say sadly.

It was always so painful for Sasha to see her sister like that. "Misha, you know full well what's happening. I know you do, because you can't help but stare at yourself in the water every day."

"Tee hee hee hee. About what~su?"

"Oh, stop. You know the longer you feel down, the weaker your powers become. Just look at yourself. Your face looks more tired than mine."

Sasha produced a small silver hand mirror from inside her dress and shoved in front of Misha's face.

"I see~su. Well, you always were cute~su, Sacchan."

"That's not the point! I'm going to fix you up good tomorrow if it molts me!"

"Oh, Sacchan... You're so cool~su. Tee hee hee hee."

Misha watched enviously as Sasha extended her wings and took off.

Angels were able to live a long life because they received a wondrous power by bringing happiness to mankind. But in Misha's case, because she had not been able to do so, her powers had slowly begun to

dissipate. In time, an angel who lost her powers would fade away, eventually turning into a single drop of water to be swallowed up by the rainbow river.

And that was why Misha visited the river everyday—in hopes she might soon melt into it. She felt it would be better if she just disappeared into the water. Ever since *that* incident, Misha had become a most pessimistic, broken, and fallen angel.



Sasha hurriedly headed towards the center of Heaven—to the grand shrine perched atop a hill.

“If Misha keeps this up, she’ll end up melting into the waters of Heaven. I’ve got to do something. I’ve got to speak to the Archangel before it happens.”

Sasha had but one hope for Misha, and to this single hope she entrusted everything. That was why she came here. To the home of highest ranked angel in the heavens—to the shrine of the Archangel. The building radiated a soft white light and its splendor was breathtaking—nay, overwhelming to any and all that approached it.

Of course, no one was allowed to lay eyes upon the Archangel. But they were allowed to speak with

him through a silken curtain.

"My Lord, Archangel... It pains me to make this petition, but as Misha's older sister, I cannot turn a blind eye and allow her to continue on this way. I beg for you to impart your wisdom upon me."

For a long time, there was nothing but silence. Sasha stood her ground and waited patiently, until from beyond the curtain, a most majestic voice resounded. "We commend your zeal, Sasha. Take Misha to the cave in the northern outskirts," the Archangel said heavily.

"B...but that cave is...?"

"That is correct. If she is able to emerge from the cave, then in time she shall surely become a great angel. If not..."

For a second, Sasha doubted herself in coming to the Archangel for advice but those doubts were quickly replaced by her faith in the Archangel.

Sasha bowed her head deeply. "Yes, my Lord."

On the way home, Sasha drew upon all her knowledge. She had heard rumors of the cave the Archangel mentioned but never of an angel that had gone inside.

Even Sasha could not see what the future held... But if the caves provided Misha the chance to reclaim

herself, maybe it was worth the risk. Even if it meant Misha would not return. For right now, each day Misha lived, she also died a little as her life force drained away. It was imminent she would turn to water; so surely this was a better resolution than to simply watch as Misha awaited her sad demise...

By the time Sasha arrived home, her mind was made up and her resolve unyielding.

2

“Sacchan, you’re hurting me~su. Where are ya takin’ me?”

“Just zip your lips and follow me.”

“But look at those dark clouds up there! They look like they could fall on us any minute. I don’t want to go in theres~su!”

Sasha dragged Misha from her usual haunt along the rainbow river. Misha tried to run away, but no angel had ever escaped Sasha. With Misha’s hand in a vise-like grip, Sasha walked towards the northern cave with steps heavy as thunder.

“Sacchan, you’re scarin’ me todays~su.” Misha looked as if she were about to cry. Because of that, the already dark clouds grew even darker and now looked as if they had been stained black. Large drops of rain began to fall.

“Listen up, Misha. This is an important test that’ll determine whether you can or can’t become an angel.

I need you to try your best,” Sasha said, staring deep into Misha’s eyes.

Misha couldn’t help but wince slightly at Sasha’s serious expression. “But, Sacchan, can’t ya come with me~su?” Misha asked helplessly.

“No. This is a trial that you have to overcome on your own, Misha. But I’ll be here, praying for your success the whole time. I promise.”

“Okies~su! If you say I’ve got to do this and try my best, Sacchan, then I’ll do it and try my very bestest~su...because you’ve always comforted and protected me~su!” Misha said and nodded the affirmation of her statements as she prepared herself to go in.

“Good luck, Misha.”

“Thanks! I’ll try my best~su!”

In front of the cave’s mouth, Sasha gave her final words of encouragement to Misha.

Misha waved goodbye, and then, with all her might, yanked at the door to the cave.

Creeeeaaaak...

The door slowly ground open. It must not have been opened for a long time, because as she stepped inside, a musty odor assailed her nostrils. The room



in which she stood was about five meters in each direction.

"I thought there were only pretty places in Heaven. Guess I musta been wrongs. There are dark places too~su."

It wasn't pitch-black, like she had initially thought. Shards of light peeked into the room through cracks in the rock walls. Misha could see how the slivers of light crisscrossed and intertwined with one another, giving the room a most fantastical appearance.

"Wow wee! That's amazing~su!" Misha exclaimed, more awed than scared by the luminous spectacle.

"But what do I do now?" she wondered, and glanced at her surroundings. On the floor by the entrance, Misha noticed a rod of some sort that emitted a white ray of light.

"Yahoo! It's my lucky day~su!"

She picked the object from the floor; it was a "Wherever Light." This particular light was able to adjust naturally to its surroundings, shining stronger where it was darker, weaker in a lighter area. It was Heaven's equivalent of a flashlight.

Misha pointed the light out at chest height. Im-

mediately, light began to flood the room, illuminating it from one end to the other. Deeper within the cave, Misha noticed another door.

"Well, I guess they're tryin' to tell me to keep movin' forward, no matter what happens."

Misha pushed the door open and stepped in.

Except, there was nothing to step on.

"Tee hee! What's going on~su?!" She fell into a pitch black hole. It went even blacker as she lost consciousness.

Rustle rustle... something was tickling her feet...

"Tee hee... Tee hee hee hee hee hee!!! Please stop! Stop, that tickles~su!"

Misha woke with a start and jumped to her feet. The ground felt oddly squishy.

"Ugigigigigi! That hurts!" a high-pitched voice echoed throughout the darkness.

"Waaahh?! You scared me~su!!" Misha searched the ground with her hands, hoping the Wherever Light had fallen with her. Finding the familiar grip, she shone it in the direction the voice had come from. Framed by the light's glow was a small, angel-winged rabbit.

"Wow wee! You've got wingies~su!"

The little rabbit sneered as it looked over Misha haughtily. "And despite being so big, you've got itty bitty wings, don't you... Who are you?"

"My name's Misha~su... But wow! How amazing. Your wings are so *big*..." Misha said with a mix of awe and envy.

"Don't get all emotional over something simple, stupid."

"Since you have wings, you must be a rabbit angel~su, right, Miss Bunny Angel? You look like my little bunny~su." Misha touched the bunny clip in her hair.

Perhaps it was a trick of the light, but the winged rabbit looked almost as if it scowled at her words. "I don't see the resemblance. And that's not my name."

The rabbit tried to correct Misha a few times, but all in vain. Misha continued to call her "Miss Bunny Angel," and she just gave up.

Unlike her soft, cuddly appearance, the rabbit angel's words were quite venomous. "Never mind, if you want to call me that insipid name, fine. It's not like I care...what was it again? Misha or something?"

In the heavens, a certain tribe of rabbits had been designated as advisors to the angels. These rabbits were supposed to run to an angel's side and support

them whenever the angel found themselves worried, confused or in trouble. More often than not, the rabbits would adhere to newer angels. This rabbit seemed to be a member of that tribe.

"But I'm so glad you're here~su. I was so scared on my own. But now you're here too, Miss Bunny Angel, I'm so relieved~su! It's very nice to meet you~su," Misha bowed.

The rabbit angel simply crossed her arms and looked Misha up and down, a contemptuous glare in her eyes. "So, Misha, what did you do to land yourself here?"

"Do?"

"Well, the only reason you'd be here is if you did something that warranted punishment."

"Eh? So this is a punishment room~su?"

"That's right! Didn't you know that? This is the end-all of punishment rooms, with a guarantee it'll scare a baby into not crying. Take me for example... I got dumped in here because I was, shall we say, a little too naughty? No no, let's just say I got thrown in here not too long ago for getting in the way of my friends' work. They called me selfish and self-centered. I mean, *really*... Anyhow, so what did you do again?"

The rabbit angel had gotten quite heated recalling

the events that led to her placement in this room. Misha, on the other hand, had a hard time even trying to remember the events that had gotten her sent here.

"I...well...I wonder~su... Sacchan just told me it was a test of some sorts..." Misha trailed off, cocking her head to one side.

The rabbit angel narrowed her eyes accusingly, demanding an explanation.

"Oh, don't look at me like that. I can't tell you what I don't know myself~su..."

Rumble rumble rumble rumble.

Suddenly, the cave shook as if hit by an earthquake.

"Kyaaaahh?!"

"Yikes! I'm scared~su!"

Without even thinking, both Misha and the rabbit angel latched onto one another. Eventually, the tremors subsided. One of the boulders in front of them now bore a giant crack. A bright golden light poured from the opening.

"What is that~su? It's so pretty witty," Misha mumbled.

A voice spoke. "You two lack consciousness and conviction in your roles as Heavenly beings..."

"Oh my, it's the Archangel~su!"

The thunderous voice continued to speak. "... Through cooperation, you must find three orbs, hidden within this room of punishment. Only by successfully doing so will you be able to leave. But if you fail...then you shall remain here for all eternity."

A great big hole opened up right under them. It was a one-way passage into the abyss. The hole was dark and seemed bottomless to Misha. As she floated over it, a chill that bit straight to the bone cut at her while a rank, sour odor filled her nostrils.

"It's scary~su. I don't want to go theres~su," she whispered, treading air.

As for the rabbit angel, she mouthed a word in disbelief before trembling uncontrollably at the edge of the hole.

In the blink of an eye, the hole closed up again and the Archangel spoke again. "Now then, go forth. Find the orbs..."

As the Archangel's voice faded away, there was another earthshaking rumble, and the boulder was split into two parts. A bright light flashed, forcing their eyes shut.

When the two finally opened their eyes again, a sturdy looking door stood before them. Upon the door was posted a piece of paper:

Before you pass through this door, you must know your present self. Answer the following question:

“What is this~su?”

“It must be one of the trials of the punishment room. Oh, I hope it’s not about something weird,” the rabbit angel said uneasily.

You are about to travel to the Human World as an emissary. If you are able to bring one animal with you as a sign of goodwill towards Mankind, which would you bring?

1. A giraffe

2. A koala

3. A cat

4. A tiger

“What is this~su? What a strange question~su. Hmm, as a sign of goodwill...?” Misha pondered.

“It’s like a personality test. Looks like we just have to answer it to go through... Well, since I’d want to surprise everyone, I would bring number four—a *tiger*,” the rabbit angel answered quickly.

“Then I’ll bring one—a giraffe~su!” Misha an-

swered quickly.

As soon as they both answered, the door opened.

Creeeeeeaaaaaak.

Before them was a giant board, which they had to step through the door to read.

If you chose 1, the giraffe, then what you lack is assertiveness. When it matters, you often hide or withdraw yourself from the situation. Be more courageous and start promoting yourself to others.

If you chose 2, the koala, then what you lack is fortitude. You tend not to hear others out to the end and are often hotheaded. You must learn patience and self-control.

If you chose 3, the cat, then what you lack is consideration. You are content as long as you are happy, and choose to keep to yourself, possibly alienating yourself from others. You ought to be more giving in spirit.

If you chose 4, the tiger, what you lack is discretion. You are prone to act on impulse, which often leads to regret in the aftermath.

Take the time to think things through.

The two read as if hungrily devouring the words before them.

“Hmph! And so what? What’s so wrong about being impulsive anyhow?” the rabbit angel muttered, clearly displeased with the outcome of her personality test. “If you think too long, you just end up pounding on a stone bridge³ forever and ever without getting anywhere. Thinking too much isn’t going to get us out of here any quicker... Don’t you think?”

Misha wasn’t quite sure if her result was right on or completely off. She had never once thought to promote herself to others or step into the limelight. In fact, ever since that incident—ever since she did what no angel should ever do—the only thing on her mind was making herself disappear. And she had been trying to do that for so very long now.

Creeeeeaaaaak...

The door shut behind them.

“Oh no, we can’t get back out~su!” Misha exclaimed as she tried in vain to turn the knob. The metal door didn’t budge.

“The three orbs are in here anyhow, so who cares? Let’s go already,” the rabbit angel said. She tapped Mi-

sha on the shoulder and started down the right passage. Misha wasn't quite sure if the rabbit was extremely gutsy...or just extremely clueless.

"Urm, maybe we should read the map on this door before we decide which way to go~su?"

Perhaps the test was right about the rabbit angel lacking discretion, Misha thought.

"R-right...I was just about to do that," the rabbit stammered. "...Seriously..." She quickly made a u-turn towards the map on the door as if she had known it was there the whole time.

Misha nodded and stood next to the rabbit angel to read the map. "These points marked with the circles must be where the orbs are~su."

The map outlined the structure they were now locked in. According to the map, the structure was arranged like three equilateral triangles that pointed into one another at the center. The triangles were connected by what looked like three long corridors.

With hasty inspection, one might think the structure looked like a single, hexagonal building from above instead of three separate ones. At the center, there seemed to be a plaza-like area, marked on the map by a big red dot.

"I'm guessing that once we find the three orbs, we

deliver them to this red dot to finish out.”

“Wow wee, Miss Bunny Angel! You sure know a lot~su!” Misha gleefully exclaimed as she showered the rabbit with applause.

“Any stooge with half a brain could tell what we had to do by looking at the map... Speaking of which, this map sure is simple. We’re just going to end up having to walk around anyhow to figure out where things are. I doubt it would have mattered much whether we looked at it or not.”

“I’m sowwy. You’re absolutely rights~su,” Misha apologized sincerely.

Although the rabbit angel had planned on making a snide comment, hearing Misha’s heartfelt and surprising apology she decided against it. Influenced by Misha’s trusting and unquestioning innocence, it seemed as if the rabbit angel’s egotistical personality began to soften.



They decided to head down the right corridor first. At the end of it, another door stood.

Rumble rumble rumble rumble.

A rather loud noise came from the other side

of the door. Heart racing, Misha tried to open it but it was much too heavy for her to nudge even in the slightest.

"I think something's pushing on it from inside~su." Even after placing both hands on the door and putting all her weight into it, the door wouldn't budge. Because the rabbit angel was so small, any heavy lifting went to Misha.

"You can do it, Misha!" the rabbit angel cheered without lifting a paw.

The encouragement was all Misha needed. She threw herself at the door again with a happy, "Yooooo!"

And with a straining "GAAAH HH," the door slowly began to open.

Suddenly, a fierce gust of wind charged at Misha and the rabbit angel.

"Kyaaaahh!"

"I'm gettin' dizzy wizzy~su!!"

The wind entangled Misha and the rabbit into its swirling tendrils, and sucked them into the next room.

"Nooooo!!"

One meter from slamming into the ground, a hu-

mongous cushion-like object appeared out of nowhere to soften their fall.

Popff! Their bodies bounced safely. It felt like they were sitting on top of a hot air balloon.

"We're saved~su!"

"This place wants me to drown in cold sweat, I swear."

For a second, both Misha and the rabbit angel felt safe and breathed easy. That is until they looked down—

"Ewww! How grossy~su!"

The 'balloon' was actually a giant mushroom. As they sat on the mushroom's cap, wriggling tentacles extended towards them menacingly.

"Whoa, we need to get down quick~su!" Misha grabbed the rabbit angel's paw and leapt from the mushroom. Once on the ground, she ran from it as fast as she could, rabbit angel in tow.

"What is this place? The jungle? Weren't we in a desert just now? What is up with these random environmental changes?" the rabbit angel said.

"Everything looks so big~su," Misha said at the same time.

It wasn't just the mushroom that was gigantic. Everything around them was big. Even the blades of

grass were a hundred times larger than normal. Next to them, Misha and the rabbit angel were tiny, scared bugs.

"Given our predicament, I'd say we're doomed to getting eaten by a praying mantis or something just as nasty..."

"Oh, Miss Bunny Angel! Don't say things like that~su! If you haven't noticed, everything you've said so far's been comin' true~su..."

"As if. It's all just coincidence, silly."

Suddenly, a cool rush of air whipped against Misha's face. Something flashed green in the corner of her eye and disappeared.

Misha felt the sharp pain of being nicked by a *kamaitachi*⁴. A single, straight cut formed on her cheek. "Owwie!"

"Are you hurt? You're really not very angel-like are you, Misha...?"

Hearing the rabbit angel's surprise, Misha's heart was suddenly filled with sadness, and the bitter sense that she was truly Heaven's worst angel flooded through her anew.

"Tee hee hee hee... I'm okies~su. It'll heal up in no time."

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean it like that. I didn't mean

to upset you,” the rabbit angel said quickly, seeing the hurt expression on Misha’s face. *I’ve got to fix that about myself. I can’t just say the first thing that comes to mind*, she thought regretfully.

Another gust of air rushed by and with it, came the green flash again.

“It is a mantis after all~su!” Misha shouted.

Just as the rabbit angel predicted, a praying mantis had come for them. Up close it was a revolting sight, with soft downy hair growing in thick patches against its venom-green skin.

“This way~su!”

They ran for their lives.

Eventually they outran the mantis but their trials continued. Deep within the suspicious overgrowth of the jungle, they were almost crushed by a scarab’s ball of dung, chased by a cricket, and stung by a caterpillar’s spines that inflamed their hands...

“Ugh, enough of this gross-out world! Let us out already!” the rabbit angel screamed at the top of her lungs. This time, her words didn’t come true.

Though weary and shaken, the two worked together and found their way to a bug-free clearing.

“Oh, thank goodness~su. But we still haven’t found those orbs yet. I wonder where they are~su?”

Misha looked around. Aside from the luxurious and dense plant life that grew about, she saw nothing.

"Aww, would you look at this? My fur's all ruined!" The rabbit angel pouted, and began to clean herself with her paw.

Though it had barely been two hours since they set off in search of the three orbs, they had been an exhausting two hours comprised mainly of running away or in circles. Now, shoulders sagging and feet throbbing, the two plodded down a straight path. At the end of the path was a lake, which must have been more like a puddle to the insects that chased them. They made sure the water was calm and empty before they decided to take a short break beside the lake.

"Ahh, I feel like I've been here for a week," the rabbit angel sighed as she lay down in a soft, grassy patch.

"I'm a little thirsty, so I'm gonna take a little drink~su."

Misha edged closer to the lake, and as she reached out to gather a handful of water...

"Waahhh!"

Losing her balance at the last moment, Misha fell right into the water with a big splash.

"I can't swim very well~su! Help me, Miss Bunny Angel!! Help me~su!!" she cried as she extended her hand towards the rabbit angel.

"Oh no, Misha! I don't know what to do!"

Even with her paws extended as far as they would go, the rabbit angel's little arms were still much too short to reach Misha.

I could leave her to drown and find the orbs on my own... the thought flashed through the rabbit angel's mind. But she thought of all the hard work Misha had done on her behalf and she suddenly felt ashamed of herself for entertaining the notion at all. Her brain worked overtime for a few seconds—

"Just hold tight! I'll get you out of there. I promise..." the rabbit angel hollered, words trailing off as she disappeared out of view.

"I'll be right here~su! I'll try my bestest to keep afloat~su!" Misha coughed out, moving her arms and legs frantically as she treaded water.

Without the rabbit angel around, Misha felt all alone in the strange jungle. But she wasn't worried at all.

"Fuu fuu...everything's all right~su. Fuu fuu... Miss Bunny Angel will come save me~su." It was more a statement to help Misha feel better than a

possibility.

"I've got to find something for Misha to grab on to. Then Misha can just pull herself up...that's got to work!" the rabbit angel repeated desperately to herself.

This was the first time ever she had done something for someone other than herself. It was scary and, even though she wanted to cry, she continued to diligently scour the overgrowth.

After five minutes of frantic searching, she finally stumbled upon something useful.

"This will work!"

As in any other subtropical jungle, thick vines wound themselves around the tree trunks. The rabbit angel found the perfect candidate for rescue activity and, using her sharp little teeth, began to chew right through. In her mind, the thought of Misha drowning because she had taken too long crept into her mind and urged her on.

Rustle. She finally chewed through one end of the vine.

"...Now to tie this end here and...Misha, grab a hold of this!" she shouted, and threw the other end of the vine at Misha.

Splish!

"Misha, hurry! Grab that vine!"

It's too late~su, Misha was thinking. *I'm too tired...* Misha hovered on the verge of unconsciousness. The rabbit angel's shrill voice snapped her out of her daze.

"You can do it!!"

The rabbit angel's cries spurred Misha on and she clung to the vine for dear life. About a dozen minutes after falling into the lake, Misha managed to drag herself onto dry land.

"Thank you so much~su! You saved me~su. I'm alive and it's *all* because of you~su, Miss Bunny Angel!" Misha gushed as she showered the rabbit angel with hugs.

The rabbit angel couldn't help but blush.

"Don't thank me, silly. You've helped me so many times before, it's the least I could do. But don't go around falling into any more lakes. There's too much of a weight difference and it's hard on me." The rabbit angel grinned as she rubbed her cheeks and shoulders, which were flushed a dark shade of red.

"You're right. Even if I go on a diet, I can't help that~su," Misha said with a bright "Tee hee hee hee hee" at the end. But it wasn't the usual, forced laugh she often gave to others. No, this one was straight

from the heart.

FLASH!

As if reacting to her laughter, the area around them turned white, and bright rays of sun shone down on the jungle.

“—I can’t believe it!”

“—Wow wee! How pretty~su!” both the rabbit angel and Misha exclaimed simultaneously.

The warm light from the sun enveloped the entire jungle and, just as quickly as it appeared, the vast jungle and its menagerie of nasties faded away like shadows.

In its place stood a grand temple crafted of marble. Along the walls were a number of intricately carved statues, each of which emitted a soft, holy-looking glow. There was an air of sanctity about the temple and standing before it—just the act of taking it all in—settled and calmed the soul.

“Misha, look!”

One of the statues held in its hands a marble orb that shone with a red light.

“That must be one of the three orbs the Archangel was talking about,” the rabbit angel said. She clamped onto it with a bounce.

Slip...

“Oh no! It’s gonna break!” The rabbit angel cov-

ered her eyes.

Misha dashed forward and caught the orb right before it hit the ground. "And she's safe~su!!"

"Nice catch, Misha!"

The two gave each other a high five and pumped their arms in victory. Although they had been total opposites when they first met, no one would know that by looking at them now. Like old friends, their timing was impeccable.

"Since we've got one, let's move onto the next... *Hmm?* What's wrong, Misha?"

The rabbit angel glanced at Misha, who was staring, entranced, at a giant, slightly grimy, stone bench-like object in the temple.

"There's someone in there~su. They're saying it hurts so please release them~su," Misha explained just before she fell upon the bench and attempted to break it open.

"What in the heavens are you doing?!" the rabbit angel exclaimed.

Misha was using the edge of her hand to chop at the stone; the rabbit thought she'd break her hand sooner than the bench. Still Misha kept at it.

The rabbit angel stepped closer to the bench. A shadowy image of something animal-like appeared on

the surface of the stone. But the rabbit angel dismissed it as her eyes playing tricks on her.

“Look, it’s just a pattern in the rock, silly. If there’s anything in there, it’s a fossil at best. Now come along. Let’s go find the way to the next orb.”

But Misha wouldn’t budge.

“Fine. Then I’ll go look by myself.” The rabbit angel set off on her own and searched the temple from one end to the other. But there was no sign of an exit.

“What is going on here? How do they expect us to leave if they don’t give us a darn door,” she sighed, and looked at the gorgeously painted ceiling.

Hidden in the ceiling image was an ornate door. Staring at it, the rabbit angel expected a beautiful goddess to step through any moment.

“But it’s just a picture of a door. We can’t get through something like that. Plus, it’s way up there... Ahh, what to do, what to do?”

At a complete loss for answers, the rabbit angel found her way back to Misha only to find her still hard at work. Instead of her hands, Misha was now using rock shards she had found on the floor to chip away at the stone. The loud banging resounded throughout the temple.

“Stop this, Misha! It’s just an illusion,” the rabbit

angel said, a look of disbelief on her face.

"No, it's not~su. Just listen closely, Miss Bunny Angel. You can hear it too~su."

On Misha's desperate insistence, the rabbit angel pressed her ears to the stone.

Hiiii~n. Hiiii~nn.

It was faint, but definitely there. A heartbreaking cry for help.

"You're right. What? They want to get out?"

"Yeppers. But the voice is getting weaker and weaker so I'm so worried~su."

"Wait a minute. What if we help this voice out and then it turns out we actually unleashed some horrible monster...? Did you even think of that? Maybe we ought to rethink this whole thing..."

But Misha was so engrossed in the task at hand she didn't hear a word the rabbit angel said. Seeing the determination in Misha's face, the rabbit angel sighed in defeat and decided to help Misha instead.

"Gosh, you're such a softie, Misha. I swear, if a monster jumps out, I'm totally blaming you..."

Seemingly quite unaware of how much of a softie she too was becoming, the rabbit angel began to chip away at the stone with her front teeth.

"Oh, thank yas, Miss Bunny Angel~su. You're

much too kind. But don't your front teeth hurt when you do that~su?"

"I'm fine, silly. They don't call me 'Steel Tooth' for nothing! More importantly, though...your hands, Misha. They're all bruised and banged up. Why don't you take a break?"

"Nah, I'm fine~su," she replied.

But they didn't seem fine at all.

"You're so stubborn in the strangest ways, aren't you?" the rabbit angel grumbled.

Misha shook her head vehemently. "I'm really not~su. It's just that...it's just that I want to help out the person crying inside of here~su. Their cries about getting out, about how much it hurts... I can't help but feel their pain right here." Misha placed a hand over her heart. "And it just makes me want to cry~su..."

With her hand tight against her chest, hot tears suddenly flowed down Misha's cheeks. Even the bunny in Misha's hair looked as if it might start to cry at any moment. Seeing Misha and her hair clip, their faces damp with tears and sweat, the rabbit angel couldn't help but be moved to tears.

"...If you feel this much empathy for someone you don't even know...how could you possibly be a failure as an angel? You seem to have the perfect personality

for it..." the rabbit angel marveled.

And then it hit Misha. How long had it been since she thought or cared about anyone but herself? All this time she had been preoccupied with her sin and her crimes. She hadn't given anyone else the time of day.

Sacchan had always been so kind to her, giving her words of advice and comfort. And she even ignored that. How did she survive being so selfish for so long? Misha wondered. An overwhelming sense of remorse washed over her...

Clunk. The sound of a big chunk of rock falling against the floor interrupted Misha's train of thought.

"Yes! Just a bit more!" the rabbit angel squealed in delight.

There was a large crack in the stone now, and with just a few more strikes, the voice's identity would soon be revealed.

"That's great~su...but the voice...I can't hear it anymore~su. We've got to hurry~su!"

Misha chipped away at the stone more fervently than before.

"You'll break your hands if you keep that up!"

But the stone remained as unyielding as ever.

"It's no good~su." The tears that fell from Misha's eyes fell upon the stone. And as they fell and were

absorbed into the rock, what was burnt brown colored rock turned black.

And then, the unmovable stone began to shake on its own.

"This reminds me of a legend I heard a long time ago..." the rabbit angel murmured as she stared into the tear soaked stone.

"Neigh neigh," a voice cried from inside the stone.

"Eh?" both of them exclaimed at once.

As the weakened stone crumbled away, a Pegasus with giant wings sprang from the dust.

The Pegasus shook its head and tousled its mane as it released another sonorous "neigh."

"Thank you for helping me. In repayment for your kindness, allow me to escort you to the next destination." The Pegasus picked both Misha and the rabbit angel up with its mouth and placed them on its back.

"Really~su?"

Instead of a response, the Pegasus merely neighed and kicked its hooves against the floor of the temple.

Lift off. The Pegasus rose immediately into the air, flying higher and higher with each stride.

"Whoa! We're gonna hit the ceiling~su!" Misha yelled.

But the rabbit angel knew where they were headed. "We're going there, aren't we?! To that door up there!"

As the Pegasus approached the gorgeously painted door on the ceiling, it suddenly came to life and flung itself open.

A sprawling night sky studded with a myriad of stars unfolded before them. To Misha, each glittering star seemed to shine down just for her as if to say, "You can do it, Misha!"

"Wow! This must be the Land of Stars!" Misha hoped with all her heart that one day she might learn how to shoot stars and bring comfort and encouragement to so many others.

"It's just so...beautiful. I don't know what else to say," the rabbit angel added in awe, for once quite tongue-tied.

The Pegasus neighed loudly as if to say, "It's just a little extra thank you..." before winking at the rabbit angel perched on its back.

"It feels so nice~su."

"Yeah..."

The Pegasus was a wonderfully comfortable mount and on its back, the two were filled with nothing but giddiness.

“Say, Misha...? Did you know I had a feeling a Pegasus might show up?”

“Really~su?”

Looking straight into Misha’s face, the rabbit angel began to relay the tale of the Pegasus.

“Yep. According to myth, when the hero, Perseus, beheaded the monstrous Medusa, the gorgon’s vile blood sprayed onto a nearby boulder. It’s believed Pegasus sprang from that bloodstained boulder. Back there, your tears fell upon that stone, didn’t it? It’s a little different from the original legend, but I was thinking maybe that’s where Pegasus got the energy it needed to break out of its stony prison.”

“Wow wee, Miss Bunny Angel! You know everything’, don’t ya~su? You’re really amazing~su! So, what happened to the legendary Mr. Pegasus after that~su?” Misha asked, curious about the rest of the story.

“Well, let’s see. After springing from that rock, Pegasus went on a number of adventures with some great Greek heroes and slew some pretty nasty monsters until... Hmm...until what...? What am I forgetting...about...this...? Oh!”

The rabbit angel let out loud squeak.

“What’s wrong~su?”

“I actually didn’t want to remember that one...”

the rabbit angel said meekly, on the verge of tears.

“One day, the Pegasus was stung by a bee as it flew. It was so surprised it threw the hero mounted on its back right off...”

Before the last of the rabbit angel’s sentence was even out of her mouth, the Pegasus reared up with a loud neigh.

“Oh gosh, everythin’ you say really does come true~su, Miss Bunny Angel...”

“I’m so sorry...”

“Waahhh! Help!!”

As promised by the rabbit angel’s words, Pegasus promptly shook the two riders off its back.



A small drop of water fell onto Misha’s face.
Splish.

“Whoa, that scared me~su!” Misha hollered as she jumped up, wide awake. She surveyed the area around her. “Miss Bunny Angel?”

The rabbit angel lay flat on her back, not far from Misha.

“Miss Bunny Angel! Are you okay? Wake up~su!”



“Urrnnn. Urrhhnnn,” the rabbit angel moaned as she stirred.

Misha gently shook her, and she slowly opened her eyes. Misha’s chest fell heavily as she breathed out a big sigh of relief. “Phew~su.”

“Where are we?”

“I’m not sure~su.”

They inspected their surroundings; they had landed next to a large lake. Across the lake loomed a large mountain.

“I wonder if the second orb is there...” Misha said.

In front of the lake stood a statue of a very handsome young man holding a water jug in one hand. His free hand was raised to Heaven.

“He’s quite handsome, isn’t he?” The rabbit angel said. “He must have something to do with the orb. Maybe there’s some sort of mechanism hidden on him...?” She began to push here and there on the handsome statue. Nothing happened.

“Maybe we’re supposed to go over there~su,” Misha said, and pointed to the mountain behind the lake. “See, there’s a piece of paper posted over there~su.”

“You’re right. Let’s go check it out.”

The two companions set off toward the foothills.

Just as before, there was a cave here with a billboard next to it. Another question was posted for them to answer.

Though one may achieve victory behind a facade of serenity, the desire of the soul is an unflagging force. When one's desire is too great, the soul is corrupted and that breeds misfortune. You must face the desires within, and strive to suppress those flames that burn too bright.

One day you awake to find one of your body parts has been enlarged while you slumbered. Which of the following is it?

1. Your eyes have become big, like those of a cartoon character.
2. Your nose has been changed as if you received cosmetic surgery.
3. Your mouth has been split ear to ear, like a cracked-mouth ghost.
4. Your forehead has broadened and shines like that of a space alien.

"Ack, another weird question! Why do I get the feeling the Archangel's just having a laugh and *toying*

with us...? At any rate, since I like to talk, I suppose I pick three, my mouth," the rabbit answered quickly once again.

"*Hrrrm...* I think I like number one the best, so I choose one~su."

The rabbit angel rolled her eyes at Misha. "That's it? That's how you're making your decision? That's *so* not right."

A loud noise disrupted their exchange.

Creeeeeaaaak...

The door to the cave opened.

And now to announce your results:

If you chose 1, the eyes, what you wish for is love. Are you fearful you won't be loved by anyone? If you wish to be loved, you must first work on loving yourself and becoming more confident.

If you chose 2, the nose, what you wish for is recognition and honor. Instead of only doing things for yourself, focus on doing things for others and what you seek will surely fall into your lap.

If you chose 3, the mouth, perhaps you've been quite stressed of late. Do you tie every-

thing to food? Whenever you feel like eating, control your cravings by throwing yourself into a hobby instead.

If you chose 4, the forehead, perhaps you're unhappy about the lack of stimulation in your life. Don't just wait for things to come to you. Instead, pick up a book and dive head-long into the intellectual world.

"I see. My appetite, eh? No wonder I've been so hungry lately... But quite honestly, I don't see how that helps at all... I mean, I suppose I could go on a little diet..." the rabbit angel mumbled to herself, nodding as she read.

Misha was quite taken back by what she read. It was absolutely spot on, but at the same time it quite scared her. It was if someone knew everything about her. They had seen right through her lack of confidence, and knew how she always ran away from confrontation.

The Archangel really is amazing~su, Misha thought. But I wish He'd teach me how to get my confidence back. If I knew how, I'd start working on it right away... It was clear she still wasn't quite sure how to look forward yet.

"Are you serious? We worked our butts off for this?"

The rabbit angel had a befuddled look on her face as she stared at a little plaque beside the billboard.

The orb is at the Dragon.

"That's it? Just like that?"

"But it's also kinda easy, like a gimme, and that's good, isn't it~su? But we have to face a dragon, do we? Sounds a bit scary~su," Misha said with a slightly frightened expression on her face.

Nestled in her hair, her bunny hair clip mimicked her.

Misha and the rabbit angel stepped into the cave. Following the instructions exactly as they were written on the plaque, the two made their way through. The ceiling was terribly low, and the passage wasn't very wide either. The ground was rough and uneven, and quite hard to navigate. They carried on and eventually arrived at a circular clearing about a meter and half in diameter.

"This must be like a rest stop. We can finally take a breath here," the rabbit angel said, and smiled as she stretched her arms and legs.

Suddenly, *click click*. A clicking noise from above their heads. They looked up and spied a number of iron bars lowering themselves from the ceiling. With a thud, a metal cage landed around Misha and the rabbit angel, trapping them inside.

"I guess we shouldn't have let our guard down~su," Misha whispered.

GOooooOHhhhHH. A creepy rumble echoed through the cave.

Splash. Splish splish... The sound of water as well.

"Oh no, oh no~su! Water! Water's pouring in~su!" Misha flailed her arms and legs, panicked by the memory of her near drowning not too long ago.

"Misha, it's all right. I'm here with you..." the rabbit angel said in attempt to calm Misha down, but the words were lost on the frantic Misha.

"Oh, very well then!" the rabbit angel grumbled. She leapt up and bit Misha on the right cheek.

"Owwwieeee~su!"

As Misha jumped from the pain, the rabbit angel leapt again, this time licking Misha's cheek instead.

"All right, you, look at me! There, focus! We're here together and that's key. We can do this *together*. We can get out of here, okay?"

"O-okay~su. I'm so sorry for goin' a bit nuts~su..."

With the rabbit angel's encouragement, Misha finally regained control.

The water continued to pour into the room. Within minutes, it covered their feet and was now working its way up to Misha's knees.

"Everything will be okay if we can get out of this cage. There must be some sort of release catch somewhere."

The two searched the area frantically.

"Miss Bunny Angel! Up there~su! That must be it~su!"

Through the cage bars she saw a single round button on the cave ceiling. It looked suspicious, but given the alternative, they decided to give it a go.

"You're the perfect size to fit though those bars, Miss Bunny Angel. Can you slip through and press the button for us~su?" Misha asked.

"But I won't be able to reach that high."

"What are you talking about~su? With wings that big, you'll be okies~su."

The rabbit angel blinked in distress. "A-about my wings...well, th-they're fake. They said I was much too selfish to earn my real wings yet, so they're still tiny..."

Out of all my friends...I'm the only one who doesn't have them, so...I sort of caused a bit of a stink...and got thrown in here. I'm so sorry...for lying."

The rabbit angel removed the fake wings with a snap. In their place were two very small wings.

"I see~su. Then, I guess that makes you a failure just like me~su. I'm so glad I'm not alone~su. If I were the only one, I wouldn't know what to do. But me and you are the same~su! ♪" Misha laughed happily.

Though the rabbit angel thought she wasn't entirely happy being grouped with Misha as a failure, she felt oddly comforted by Misha's bright smile.

"You think I can really do it?"

"Yes. Because you have wingies~su. Even thought they're small, if you believe you can fly, you can~su."

The rabbit angel grinned. "You're right. We've got to try, the two of us. Because trying beats dying."

Urged by Misha's words, she felt her resolve harden. In order to launch the rabbit angel from the highest point possible, Misha stood on her tiptoes and put her hands face up and flat through the bars like a perch for the rabbit angel to stand upon.

"Am I too heavy?"

"Nope, not at all~su. I got yas~su!"

Resting on Misha's palms, the rabbit angel began to flap her little wings.

Up, up and...down she came. Ten centimeters into the air, the rabbit angel fell back onto Misha's palms.

"I can't do it," the rabbit angel whined in defeat.

"You can~su! You can fly~su!" Misha continued to cheer.

Meanwhile, the water continued to rise and had almost reached Misha's hips.

"Take that! Yaaa!" The rabbit angel threw herself up over and over again.

Just a little more...just 30 centimeters higher...
Please. Please give me the strength. I'll do anything,
she prayed in her heart as she flapped her wings. And with that, her tiny wings grew just a bit.

"Miss Bunny Angel! Your wingies! They're getting' bigger~su" Misha shouted.

The rabbit angel was too engrossed in flying to notice. *I've got to imagine myself flying. That's right. Like that ride I took on the Pegasus' back. I've got to remember that feeling...and the wind on my face...*
The rabbit angel repeated the words over and over as she flapped her wings.

Float.

Her body, scrunched up from praying and flapping

so hard suddenly felt so light.

"Miss Bunny Angel, you're flyin'~su! You did it! You did it!!"

"Eh? Ah...!" The rabbit angel finally heard Misha's voice and noticed she was indeed flying.

"I can't believe it! Ah...there'll be plenty of time to celebrate later. I've got to hit that switch!"

She flapped her new wings with uneasy strokes and flew to the switch.

"Yahh!"

Bzzzzzzzzzzzz. A large buzzer sounded. And with a "click click click," the cage rose up and into the ceiling. The water drained away with a big "whoosh."

"Miss Bunny Angel, over here," Misha shouted.

"Okay! *Phew*, am I pooped," the rabbit angel sighed as she floated back onto Misha's palms with a wobble.

Having never flown before, she was absolutely drained of energy. She leaned against Misha's chest and rested her head.

Rumble rumble rumble rumble.

At that moment, all the water they thought had drained away flooded into the room and knocked them off their feet.

"Kyaaaahhh!"

Swallowed up by the raging water, Misha and the rabbit angel lost consciousness.



It hurt to breathe.

Her voice, her screams became nothing more than foam before disappearing into the dark of the water. Misha thought she must be in a lake of some kind. The water poured into her lungs when she opened her mouth to scream, making the existing pain even more excruciating. Before she knew what was happening, she was sinking deeper and deeper into the depths of the lake.

Help me~su, Miss Bunny Angel, she cried in her thoughts as she frantically flailed her arms and legs. Suddenly, before Misha's terrified eyes, the rabbit angel's limp body floated by.

Miss Bunny Angel's...dead?! No, she can't be! I've got to get her before she gets swept away by the current!

Forgetting she didn't know how to swim, Misha narrowed her eyes in determination and swam towards the rabbit angel. She surfaced right above the rabbit angel's body, took in a giant breath of air, and dove

back down.

Glub. She swallowed more water. Her lungs felt like they were on fire. It hurt, but she had to save her friend. Misha pushed past the pain and swam desperately towards the rabbit angel. Perhaps the strength of her desire to save the rabbit angel transferred to her limbs, but she continued on without fear and was soon swimming without even knowing it. The current was rough, but she struggled against it with all her might, and eventually managed to break through. She reached forward and scooped the rabbit angel into the front of her dress.

We're together again~su.

Cradling the rabbit angel to her breast, Misha searched the dark water for the surface. But there was so much foam around her she couldn't tell which way was up and which was down.

Oh no, she thought. We're going to drown. I can't hold my breath much longer.

Right at that moment—

Flash!

She noticed something flash brightly in the corner of her eye.

Was that the light of an orb? Is it guiding me to safety?

Misha kicked through the water with all her might and propelled herself towards the light.

Following the light, she was finally able to break through the surface of the water. "Buwah! Huff huff...pant pant! I... We, we made it~su!"

Still cradling the unconscious rabbit angel to her, Misha swam to shore. She lay the rabbit angel down gently and checked her for signs of life. Placing her ear to the rabbit angel's mouth, Misha confirmed her steady breathing.

"Phew~su! That was close. And it hurt so much," Misha sighed in relief.

Once she was certain of the rabbit angel's safety, she let herself finally relax. "I'll let her sleep just a little more~su."

Leaving the fast asleep rabbit angel behind, Misha began to explore the area on her own. A short distance from the water, in a darker area, she found a small shrine.

On what seemed to be the shrine's altar rested two glowing orbs.

"That's it~su! Whoa...!"

In front of the orbs, a very small dragon slept peacefully.

"Lucky us! ♪ This is a golden opportunity," a

voice suddenly proclaimed from behind Misha. She jumped.

The rabbit angel stood beside her. "So that dragon's guarding the orbs, is he? Well, good thing for us that once dragons fall sleep, they're rather hard to wake up."

"Really~su? You're so knowledgeable, aren't ya, Miss Bunny Angel~su?"

On the tip of her toes, Misha quietly snuck up to the shrine. "Hmm, there's two orbs here. Which one should we take~su?"

"We don't know which one's the right one, so just grab both for now," the rabbit angel answered.

"Roger that~su!" Misha slowly extended her hands and placed them on the two glowing orbs. The dragon continued to snore.

"Alrightie, that makes two... Now let's get out of here before that dragon wakes up."

The two climbed the staircase beside the shrine. At the top of the stairs, they found themselves staring into the lake into which they had fallen from Pegasus' back.

"So that's what this place looks like, huh?"

"Phew. I'm so tired~su."

Sitting down for a moment's rest, the two scanned

the area. Misha set down the two orbs and massaged her sore shoulders.

The rabbit angel scrutinized the orbs. "Say, look at these orbs. Don't they look the same? Can you see anything different about them?" Head on one shoulder, she looked into Misha's face.

Suddenly, they heard a loud noise from beneath the lake.

"Orororororooooon!"

It was getting closer, and sounded like the cry of a wild animal.

"Please don't tell me that's the dragon," Misha and the rabbit angel exclaimed together.

Right on cue, a dragon flew out of the lake. His eyes were bright red, as if from crying.

Seeing the two orbs, he began to cry again. *"Ororororooooon!"*

Hearing his melancholy wail, Misha felt her heart tighten in her chest. "Why are you cryin'~su?"

"I am the guardian of the orbs, but now that you've taken them from me, God will surely be very angry and scold me. That's why I'm so sad."

The tone of the dragon's voice told Misha he was still a very, very young dragon. "I'm sorry, but if we don't bring these orbs to the Archangel, He'll be very

mad at us too,” the rabbit angel explained to the baby dragon.

“But you mustn’t take them. Without those orbs, I’ll lose all my powers...and I’ll begin to waste away and die...*ororororooooon*. So please, give them back!” the dragon cried once again.

“Say, Mr. Dragon~su?” Misha said, hearing his cries. “All we want is one of the orbs~su. So couldn’t we just have one~su?”

“Mm? Really? Well, if I get even one back, He’ll most likely forgive me for sleeping on the job...” the dragon said, eyes bright with tears.

“Then you can have one back~su. Is that okies, Miss Bunny Angel?”

“That’s fine, but we don’t know which one’s the real one. If we bring back the wrong one...it could be bad for us.” A worried look crossed the rabbit angel’s face.

“Then, oh well~su. I guess we’ll just have to do it~su. I can’t bear to see Mr. Dragon’s cryin’ anymore~su. That’s much worse to me than not finishin’~su.” Misha gazed at the rabbit angel, her eyes glazed with tears.

Seeing the look in Misha’s eyes, the rabbit angel couldn’t help but be moved to agree. “You’re right. I

know what you mean...so let's return one, shall we? Yes, you're right, Misha. Let's return one."

Misha picked up the two orbs and held one in each hand. She extended the one in her right hand to the dragon.

"Thank you. So much...!" With a bow, the dragon grabbed the orb with his mouth. As soon as he did, the orb disappeared with a flash. The teeny tiny dragon's body grew much, much larger. His eyes turned golden. And with those eyes, he glared at Misha and the rabbit angel.

"Oh no, was it a trick?" the rabbit angel whimpered, grabbing hold of Misha's right arm with both of hers.

Misha held the rabbit angel's left hand tight in hers. "If we get eaten, we get eaten~su. We can't help it~su." She had made a choice and she was determined to stand by it the moment she decided to give back one of the orbs. Still, her steely resolve wasn't enough to stop her knees from shaking under her dress.

Quite unexpectedly, the dragon bowed its head even lower in what looked like gratitude.

"All the others that came before you took both of them," the dragon said. "But the thing about those orbs is that when they're together too long, they begin

to repel one another and eventually both shatter... Thank you so much for thinking about me instead of yourselves. I'd love to help you to your next destination, if you'll allow me. It's the least I can do to repay your kindness."

Swish! The dragon shook its mighty tail. With a whoosh, a giant pillar of water shot into the sky from the palm of the handsome statue by the lake.

"All you need to do is stand on this... And it'll take you to your next stop."

Gently, the dragon placed Misha and the rabbit angel on top of the pillar of water.

"The water's tickling my bottom~su. But I've always wondered what it felt like to stand at the very top of a fountain, so this is just perfect~su!"

"This thing packs quite a bit of pressure, doesn't it? We'd be in big trouble if this was a fire hose."

Though neither Misha nor the rabbit angel could agree on whether the prickling water was nasty or nice, they certainly agreed it was a fantastic experience to stand on top of water.

"Alrighty, Mr. Dragon, take care and bye-bye! Thank ya for everythin'~su!"

The dragon's happy expression filled both their hearts with joy. *Smiles are infectious and make you*

happies inside, Misha thought with a renewed faith.

Whoosh.

On a pillar of water, Misha and the rabbit angel were jettisoned to their final destination.

They emerged in a small room made entirely of glass. The room had a domed ceiling—also made of glass—from which a soft pink light sprinkled down upon them. A wide column stood in the center of the room.

“I don’t see another one of those weird tests, do you?”

“No, but there’s a piece of paper posted here~su.”

Nervously, the two read the words before them.

Good job making it this far. The final orb lies within. However, you may not travel together. One must take the right path, the other the left path. Once you are reunited, the orb will appear before you.

“Ehh? We have to separate~su? Oh no. How sad~su,” Misha said with a worried look on her face.

“Don’t worry. You can do it. This is our final task, so let’s give it our best,” the rabbit angel said with an

encouraging smile.

"All right~su. Even though we're apart, our souls are togethers~su."

"That's right. So I'll see you on the other side. Okay?"

After urging each other on, they opened the door that led from the glass room. Misha went right, and the rabbit angel started down the left path.

3

The path Misha took ended in a maze. Every wall of the maze was mirrored, and for every step Misha took, a dozen other Mishas did the same. *How creepy weepy*, Misha thought.

“I think I remember hearing...if you leave one hand on one wall and follow it all the way, you won’t get lost~su.” So Misha walked along, one hand tracing the mirrored walls.

“Hmm? Is that really me~su?”

Before her was a strange reflection. It was at the same both time her—and not her. This reflection moved differently. The Misha in the mirror was crying.

Though the idea of talking to herself seemed a bit scary, she felt she had to. Gathering a deep breath and all her courage, she spoke to her reflection. “Why are you cryin’~su?”

“*Miss Bunny Angel went ahead without me~su. She just took the orb and ran~su...*”

"Miss Bunny Angel wouldn't do something like that~su." Misha knew in her heart the rabbit angel could not and would not do what the reflection was saying.

The reflection grinned wickedly. *"How can you say that with such certainty? You doubt her and you've always doubted her. Why don't you tell the truth for once?"*

"No, that's not me~su. Miss Bunny Angel would never do anything like that~su,"

Misha continued, and clamped her hands over her ears to block out her reflection's scathing words.

"The thought never even crossed my mind~su," Misha told herself.

Flash! An image of the rabbit angel was reflected in the mirror before her.

"Oh thank goodness. It's you~su!" Misha cried happily, running up to the image.

But it was not the real rabbit angel.

"I know the truth. After I hit that button in the cave and we got swept away by the water, you thought about how easy it would be to just leave me behind and swim to safety on your own... You thought I was nothing but a nuisance, didn't you?"

"That's not true~su. You know full well we

couldn't have made it out of that cage without you, Miss Bunny Angel~su..." Misha shook her head vehemently.

The rabbit angel laughed shrilly. *"Really? Because that's what I think of you, Misha. You're nothing but an inconvenience."*

"You're lyin'~su! You're not the real Miss Bunny Angel...!" But even as she said the words, she couldn't help but wonder if there was any truth to what the false rabbit angel said.

Did you really not think it at all~su? Well, just a bit~su. But...but! No, I never think that~su!

"And why's that?" both she and the voices of a dozen Mishas asked her at once.

"Because...because...we promised we'd try our best together~su. And...when I believe in someone, I'm happy~su. If I stopped believing and started questioning...if I thought of cheating even a bit, it would become boring~su. I'm the most happy when everyone around me is happy and havin' fun~su. That's what I want~su! I want to make it so everyone feels that way~su! So everyone's happy~su!!" Misha shouted.

CRASH!

Crash crish crish crash crash!!

Every single mirror around Misha shattered. All

that was left before her was a teary yet smiling rabbit angel.

"You did it, Misha... You believed in me too, didn't you? And that makes me so happy..."

The rabbit angel jumped into Misha's arms and hugged her tight, tears streaming down her face. As they held each other, three glowing orbs floated out of the ground.

With all three orbs in hand, Misha and the rabbit angel returned to the center plaza. Inside sat a dais, and on the dais was a glass bowl.

The rabbit angel took the first orb and placed it in the bowl.

Clink.

A light, airy voice echoed around them. *"The first orb is the manifestation of Misha's trust... It is a reflection of the conviction you held in your heart for the rabbit angel even when you were trapped in the lake alone."*

Misha placed the second orb into the bowl. It fell into place with a beautiful crystalline "click."

"The second orb is a manifestation of the rabbit angel's kindness... It is a reflection of the sacrifice you showed by thinking of someone other than yourself and throwing out your own agenda in order to help

the dragon in his time of need."

Together, they placed the third and final orb into the glass bowl. *Clink.*

"The third orb is a manifestation of the truth you both share... It is a reflection of your newfound ability to face the darkness within and move forward."

Clinkity clink clink. The three orbs spun inside the glass vessel. As they spun, a rainbow-colored light shot out of the bowl.

"How beautiful~su!"

Bathed in the light's glow, Misha and the rabbit angel jumped with joy.

The light became a large rainbow, which painted an arc across the sky and stretched towards the field of flowers Misha often visited.

The rainbow was like a giant slide. "Let's take a ride on it," the rabbit angel said, and hopped onto the rainbow.

Slide slide slide.

"Ooh, me too~su!"

The two slid down the rainbow. Misha laughed happily. "It feels great~su!" As she slid, Misha continued to laugh, her heart filled with joy. Her laughter—laughter that came straight from the heart—rang throughout Heaven. "Tee hee hee hee hee hee hee hee!"

Misha's voice was light and breezy, like a bell, and warmed the hearts of all who heard it.

While Misha laughed, a shower of fragrant flower petals sprinkled from the sky.

The angels all looked into the sky and smiled.

"Misha's laughing."

"She's brought some beautiful flowers to us."

Misha finally understood. All she had to do to make others happy was to feel happy herself. And when she was happy, she could become an angel who would bring joy to many others.

It's not too late. From now on, I know I can make someone I care about happy. I want to make them happy~su!

Swearing to herself she would do exactly that, Misha laughed once more. With its eyes, the bunny clip in Misha's hair laughed alongside her.

"Tee hee hee hee hee hee!"

4

Sasha greeted Misha with a brilliant smile. "Welcome home! You did it! I'm sooo happy for you! I didn't know what I was going to do if you didn't come back. I'm just sooo happy!"

"I'm so sorry for everything I put you through, Sacchan~su," Misha apologized as she bowed her head.

"No need to apologize, so long as you know it. And it seems you've become quite good friends with that rabbit you were in there with, eh?"

"You know her, Sacchan?"

"No, but she's rather infamous. Quite the problem rabbit, just like you, Misha..."

"I see~su. She was actually very, very nice to me," Misha laughed with another "Tee hee hee hee."

Sasha was so happy, she wanted to cry. *Thank goodness. You've gotten your real smile back.*

"Sacchan, I've decided I wanna take the angel

exam~su.”

“So...you’re finally ready? Oh, I’m so glad.”

“Yep! I want to become a really good angel and make everyone happy~su! But...are you sure someone like me can become a good angel whangel~su?”

“But of course! Your laughter makes everyone in the heavens happy... Go on, see for yourself, Misha!”

“Tee hee hee hee hee hee hee hee!” Misha laughed brightly from the very bottom of her heart. This time, a rainbow appeared in the sky and golden petals fell gently all around them.

“See?” Sasha laughed as she gave her sister a great big hug.



“I’m ready to head off to the Human world~su!!”

Since obtaining the three orbs, Misha had decided to visit the Human world. After three days of packing, she was finally done, and now stood before a big cardboard box marked, “To Earth.”

“Are you sure you didn’t forget anything?” Sasha asked with a worried look on her face. “Just remember that going to the Human world is training,

in preparation for your exam. You've got to do your best, okay?"

"I knows." Misha already knew exactly where on Earth she wanted to visit. *If I go there... I know I can learn to become a wonderful angel~su. I have to practice my smile. It's what everyone likes the most about me...*

"Tee hee hee hee hee hee hee hee hee."

Misha's laughter rang through Heaven once more. Followed by the sound of someone purposefully...clearing their throat?!

I wonder who that is~su. She turned around and saw—

"Oh, Miss Bunny Angel!"

"Hey there, stranger. So here's the deal... I'm a bit worried about sending you to Earth all by your lonesome so...I've decided to go with you," the rabbit angel said with a sheepish grin.

"Really~su? Oh, that would be so wonderful~su!" Misha squealed as she showered the rabbit angel with kisses.

"Hey, quit that! That's embarrassing!" the rabbit angel said. She tried her best to repel the kisses with her paws.

I've learned so many important things because of

you, Misha. About the joys of believing and trusting someone wholeheartedly...and the inner peace that friendship brings... And know that I love you very much, even if your laugh is a bit on the strange side.

“Laugh with me, Miss Bunny Angel~su! Tee hee hee hee hee hee.”

“Tee hee hee.”

Hearing the two of them laugh, Misha’s bunny hair clip grinned to itself. Moments later, both Misha and the rabbit angel, tucked safely into the right side of Misha’s hair, jumped into the Earth bound box.

“Ouchies. I think I hit the brakes a bit too hard there~su.”

“You’re so reckless sometimes, Misha... Just look at your clothes! Goodness, you’re a mess!”

Having safely reached Earth, Misha and the rabbit angel crawled out of the cardboard box and fixed their appearance.

“I’m gonna make that person happy~su.” Misha’s eyes sparkled, full of life and determination.

Click.

The door opened. With a garbage bag in one hand, Kotarou Higuchi stepped into the hallway.

Bounce. Misha bounded in front of Kotarou, her

arms wide open. "Good morning...su!!" Summoning a great big voice that summed up all of her feelings, she said, "Please go out with me!!"

As bright as the sky was blue, Misha's voice resounded around them.



STORY 3

How to Meet People in the Human World



“I wonder where we are,” as she surveyed her surroundings. She wore a translucent one piece dress and her eyes were big and coal-black against her pale skin. She was a striking beauty to behold, but something diminishing and brutal sense she could vanish.

At first glance, she appeared to be sixteen years old... But deep down, which one looked at her, she felt like a nineteen. Curled up on her side, she looked at the world with golden eyes.

They stood in the middle of a busy street, people coming and going had appeared out of thin air, but they glided past, perhaps too wrapped in their own world to notice, much less care.

“Nyaah,” the cat suddenly

the young girl murmured
dings. She wore a white,
and black boots. Her eyes
against her porcelain skin.
behold, and yet there was
ephemeral about her...a
sh at any given moment.
appeared to be fifteen or
depending on the angle at
he could appear as old as
feet was a pitch black cat
le of a busy city sidewalk,
astily. The girl and her cat
t those around her simply
pped up in their own lives
nly cried out.

The girl nodded slightly, as if to say, "Yes, of course," and at once disappeared into the sea of people.

Her name was Shia and she was not of this world.

The cat at her feet was her chaperone.

"There are quite a few of these Humans that can sense our kind, so don't let your guard down," the cat said. At least, that's what he would have said if his mewling was translated into Human language.

Shia wasn't entirely sure what she was doing here. What she did know was that although she was certainly not of this world, she had nevertheless come to the Human world in search of something very important to her.

Her body wasn't quite used to this place yet. When she walked, she felt much too light, as if she floated unreliably on her toes instead of walking flat on her feet. It made her even more anxious than she already was. So she did her best to stay away from crowds, keeping to alleys and side streets.

After ducking into one and making sure there was no one else around, the black cat spoke again. *"Well what about here? Do you smell what you are*

looking for?"

"No, it's not here. But I get the sense it's close by. It feels so faint. I wonder how I'm ever supposed to find it."

"I don't know that myself. Even if I did, there's no point in searching if you don't find it yourself. But you do understand you don't have much time, don't you?"

"Yes. That's why I have to find it as soon as possible..."

If anyone saw Shia speaking almost fearfully to a black cat, they might think she was a strange girl. But to Shia, the black cat was not only her chaperone into the Human world, but the one and only creature she knew on Earth. She had to do as the cat asked. But she almost always felt rushed while talking to him, with not much to show for it. With that in mind, she walked on.

A short distance from the main street, she found herself at an intersection of crisscrossed narrow streets that marked the shopping district of the lower part of town.

"What a dull, unremarkable town this is. It doesn't become me at all."

"Is that so...?"

Waft.

Suddenly, a savory scent flitted over to Shia. *This is...a smell I know...?*

Without realizing it, Shia followed the enchanting aroma to a sweet dumpling shop.

Something about this place...is so familiar...

The old woman working the dumpling shop did not notice Shia at all. Instead, she opened the glass dumpling showcase and was now working diligently to line up her freshly made dumplings as perfectly as possible.

A young boy ran by with tears in his eyes. He bumped into Shia, and she bumped into the glass showcase and slid to the ground.

"Oh my, Miss! Are you all right? Kazuto! You best apologize!" the old woman scolded as she came out of the shop. But the boy just ran off.

"Terribly sorry about that, Miss. That kid's such a little brat... The nerve! Not even a word of apology! But don't worry, I'll make sure to scold him later, I promise..."

The feisty old woman smiled, and asked again if Shia was all right.

Shia gazed in the direction the boy had run. "Yes,

I'm fine. Thank you. But...wasn't that boy crying?" Shia asked, her brow furrowed with worry.

"Oh, that. I wouldn't concern yourself too much about that. It's a normal occurrence. There's a lot going on with Kazuto's family, you see...so he's always fighting with his siblings. Oh, hello there! Welcome!"

Spying a customer, the old woman cut her conversation with Shia short and rushed away.

Still very unsure of where to go, Shia slowly walked onwards.

Past the shopping district, Shia came to a little park with a swing set and a water fountain. As she glanced over the park, she noticed the boy who had bumped into her at the dumpling shop sitting on one of the swings.

As if he wanted to blow off some steam, he pumped the swing higher and higher. She thought he might loop right around the top if he went any higher...

Every so often, she heard a weeping, sobbing noise... He must still be crying.

Shia walked up to the swings slowly. "Hello there...Kazuto...was it?"

Surprised to hear his name, Kazuto scraped his

feet against the ground loudly and stopped the swing. Eyes wide, he stared at Shia. "How? How did you know my name?"

His face was a damp mess, his eyes puffy and his nose red from running so much. He looked like a younger elementary school student. He wore a *Power Rangers* T-Shirt and knee length camouflage pants, both of which were far too big for him. His eyes were very cute, bright and round like a little squirrel's, and his knees were decorated with the cuts and scrapes that marked him as an energetic, playful boy.

"That's what the old lady at the dumpling shop called you, so... Oh, you're all dirty."

Shia took a handkerchief out of her pocket and began to clean off Kazuto's face. At first, Kazuto was quite taken aback by Shia's actions. He thought about pulling away from her. But looking into her face, he couldn't help but feel safe. He tilted his face so she could wipe it better.

"That old lady's always been way too loud if you ask me," Kazuto said, just a bit spitefully.

"It's not nice to talk about her like that. She was terribly worried about you, you know."

"Really? But all she does is yell at me not to do this, or not to do that."

"She does that to teach you proper manners and behavior, Kazuto. Those aren't things you'd say to someone you didn't care for."

"Hmmm... So, she cares? About *me*...?" A bright and happy look crossed Kazuto's face. He really loved the kind and guiding manner in which this girl spoke. "So, what's your name?"

She beamed. "Oh, I'm sorry. I completely forgot to introduce myself. My name is Shia."

Shia's smile filled Kazuto's heart with a warm, fuzzy feeling. *Maybe she'll understand me*, he thought. *Because she's so kind and gentle, just like Ma was.* Kazuto suddenly wanted to tell Shia about everything that bothered him.

"They're terrible to me..." Kazuto began. Afraid to lose the one person who might listen to him, Kazuto let everything out in a flurry of words, without taking a single breath. Shia simply stood beside him and listened.

"...Up until now, I've always listened to my big brother and big sister. I did everything they asked me to do. I cleaned the toilets and I washed the tub, and they keep giving me more and more to do. So finally, I decided to talk back and guess what? I got smacked for it! They never want to listen to me. Not ever! So I

never want to go home again."

All the bitter feelings he kept within suddenly rushed forth, and with them, large tears.

"I see... You're trying your very best, aren't you, Kazuto?" Shia placed her hand on Kazuto's head and gently stroked it. Another large tear rolled down Kazuto's cheek. Shia continued in a gentle tone. "But you still ran out of the house, didn't you? I bet they're worried sick you're gone. So it might be better if...if you went home, don't you think?" Shia crouched so that she looked directly into Kazuto's eyes.

Kazuto shook his head, a pout on his lips. "No, they aren't! They don't care about me! I'll bet they haven't even noticed I'm gone!"

With that, he hopped off the swing and walked away.

"Excuse me," Shia called out behind him. "Would you teach me how to use this swing?"

Kazuto turned around and went back to Shia. "You don't know how, Shia? I've never met anyone that didn't know how to use a swing before. Lemme guess. You're no good at sports either, are you?"

"Yes. I've played *temari*⁵ before, but as for the swings...I've only just looked at them," Shia admitted shyly, a little embarrassed at her confession. "I was

always afraid I might fly away if I sat on one..."

"Okay. Here, I'll show you." He led Shia to the swing seat, sat her down, and began to shake the chains gently.

"Kyah! I feel like I'm going to fall off..." she mumbled, holding the chains for dear life. Her entire body was rigid with tension.

"You've gotta relax! Then you gotta make sure to lift your legs up in time with the swing..."

"Like this?"

Shia began to move her legs back and forth rather mechanically. But her timing was quite off, and she couldn't quite get it to swing smoothly.

"I'll swing right next to you, so try to mimic my movement and put your legs out when I do, okay?"

He sat on the swing beside Shia and began to swing.

"One, two, three...! You've gotta lean back a bit and put your legs down now." It felt good to teach someone something.

Feeling like a real teacher, Kazuto forgot all about his tears.

"All right...first I put my legs up like this and..." Shia copied Kazuto's movements and swung. At first, she seemed rather scared and could only manage a few

timid strokes. But as she got used to it, she started to swing higher and higher.

"How am I doing, Kazuto?" Shia asked Kazuto, who swung beside her.

"Great! You've got it! And you're doing a great job."

"It feels so nice."

"Don't it? Whenever I'm in a bad mood, I come here and swing for a bit. It kinda just airs everything out."

"How very true..." Shia felt the wind around her, gently caressing her face and soul. With each swing, she felt younger and younger, her spirit felt cleansed and brand new, like a child's. The thin veil of unfamiliar air that had been suffocating her lifted and everything was suddenly so clear and fresh. She began to breathe again, and with each breath, she took in the rhythm of the new world around her until it was her very own.

Enrapt in her being, Shia continued to swing.

Higher and higher—

The more wind she felt on her face, the less anxious she felt in her heart.

"Shia, Shia...! You're swinging too high! Be careful!"

Kazuto's desperate words broke her trance. But it was already too late.

"Kyaahh!"

The swing had picked up too much momentum. She found herself just about to flip over the top bar.

"Shia~san, you'll be okay! Just don't let go of the swing!" Kazuto shouted as he jumped off his swing and positioned himself where he thought he might soften Shia's fall. He wasn't sure if he could. He was quite scared, but he mustered all his courage and stood strong.

"All right, I'll try my best."

The scenery before Shia turned upside down. She squeezed her eyes shut.

Click. Clatter clatter!!

The sound of the chains wrapping around the post.

CRASH!

The impact ran through Shia, racking her body with pain. But just as Kazuto told her to do, she kept a vise-like grip on the swing.

He ran up to her. "Are you all right?" his worry-stricken voice cried out.

Shia slowly opened her eyes. "*Phew*. I think I'm all right."

"*Sheesh!* You went too high. When you first learn how to swing, you can't go so high. My...my heart was in my throat the whole time!"

"Fu fu fu." Shia laughed brightly.

"You're laughing? That was hardly funny, you know..." Kazuto said angrily.

"I'm sorry. But I couldn't help it. I started wondering how strange it was that you were better grounded than I was, Kazuto. Puzzling, isn't it?"

"Puzzling is you! You say all these grown-up things like my Ma, and then you act like such a kid... You're really weird, Shia." Kazuto puffed out his cheeks into a pout and stared at Shia.

Shia craned her neck up to meet his gaze. "Really? Am I...that strange?"

"Yeah. You're the complete opposite of my big sis. You...march to a slower beat, I guess you could say."

"I see..."

"But...I think that's a good thing. When I'm with you, it's such a warm feeling. I feel like I'm all wrapped up in my futon... *Ahhh*, I'm not making any sense to you, am I?" Kazuto scratched his head, his cheeks pink with embarrassment.

Shia watched him, a big smile on her lips. "No, I understand what you're trying to say. Thank you."

“Heheheheh...” Kazuto looked at Shia and smiled. A warm and fuzzy sort of air flowed around and through them.

“Oh my, the sun’s about to set. It’s time for you to go home, Kazuto.”

“I don’t wanna,” Kazuto said stubbornly.

Shia stood and very gently enveloped his hands in hers. “How about if I go with you? Would you go home then?”

“W-well, I...I guess if you came with me...I suppose I could.”

A sense of relief mixed with joy washed through Kazuto. After all the things he had said and done, he wasn’t quite sure he could just go back on his word and head home. But Shia’s offer gave him the perfect opportunity. Not to mention his big brother would absolutely be blown away.

I bet he’ll be speechless when he sees me with such a pretty girl. Then maybe he’ll stop making fun of me. Just the thought made Kazuto ecstatic.

Shia extended her hand to Kazuto “Well then, shall we?”

He took it and held on firmly. “Your hands are so soft, Shia.”

“Are they?”

Smiling at one another, the two walked home.

Against the sunset-stained backdrop of the city, they looked just like a brother and sister walking home, hand in hand.

Kazuto's house was but a five minute walk from the park. They walked through a residential area, intricately woven together by a number of narrow roads. Shia saw meticulously maintained flower pots and bonsai, proudly displayed in front of houses, and groups of three and four-year-old children playing beside the roads. It seemed very much like the sort of downtown residential area one might have watched in an old television melodrama.

As Kazuto walked down one of the streets, he passed quite a number of folks who, younger or older, all greeted him in friendly tones.

"Ooo, Kazu's late!"

"Yeah, Kazu, your sister keeps coming out here. She's worried sick."

"So, Kazu, whatcha been up to?"

Responding to each and every one, Kazuto continued to walk towards the end of the street.

"My, you know everyone, don't you?" Shia said to Kazuto admiringly.

"Everyone in this area is like friends...nah, like

family to one another... So there's no one here I don't know or that doesn't know me," Kazuto said with a triumphant grin. He puffed out his chest for good measure.

"And that's my house." Kazuto pointed to a quaint, two-story house built of wood. Someone waited in the entryway, but whoever it was was backlit by the light of the house, and Shia couldn't make out a face.

"Oh shoot! It's Yuu—"

"And just where the heck have you been?" A girl's voice said, overlapping Kazuto's words. Stunned, Kazuto ran behind Shia and hid.

"Help me, Shia," Kazuto whispered. "Yuu's super duper mad!"

Gripping Kazuto's hand, as if to assure him everything would be all right, Shia approached the entryway. Up close, the house was a lot older than it seemed at first glance.

The plaque on the house read, "Tamiya."

"Hello there... My name is Shia. And I'm terribly sorry for keeping Kazuto out so late. It was all my fault and not at all his... So would you forgive him? Please?"

Although surprised by the appearance of the stranger upon her doorstep, the girl scrutinized Shia

thoroughly with the wide eyes that matched Kazuto's. The girl wore her hair in two ponytails, with a well worn, bright red apron tied around her waist. She looked very bright, but also very tired.

She must have been terribly worried about Kazuto, Shia thought.

"What's going on here?" the girl asked. There was trepidation in her voice, which she didn't try to hide.

I have to make this right for Kazuto's sake, Shia told herself.

"Well, I lost my wallet over at the nearby park, you see... Kazuto noticed me looking for it, so he stayed with me to help me search. That's why he's so late... I'm terribly sorry about it," Shia explained, bowing her head deeply.

The girl seemed to believe Shia. "I see... Well, then I suppose he couldn't help coming home late, but...you should have called or something, Kazuto! I was worried sick! Here, this is your punishment...!"

Yuu flicked a finger at Kazuto's forehead with a loud snap.

Flick!

"Owww!"

Shia winced in pain, as if Yuu had directed the flick at her. At the same time, she admired Yuu's no-

nonsense attitude.

"I'm sorry," Kazuto apologized, holding his forehead.

"Now get your butt inside. As for Teppei and Tomoki, why don't you let me take care of them...? That means I'll yell enough for the both of us so quit fighting with them so much!" Though her words were harsh, her gaze was kind.

"Sorry you had to see that. Kids these days."

"Oh no, I'm terribly sorry for causing all this trouble."

Both Shia and Kazuto lowered their heads in apology.

Yuu shuffled uncomfortably. "When you're all proper like that, you really put me on the spot. So please, don't worry about it. Kazuto only did what he was supposed to do... Speaking of which, go clean up your room this minute, Kazuto! I've got dinner to worry about, and I can't take care of both your mess and mine...! Oh crap! I left the stove on...!! Take care!!!" And with that flurry of words, Yuu ran into the house.

Left on his own, a sad expression crossed Kazuto's face. "Now you see for yourself how little she cares about me."

"That's not true. Your sister was so worried about

you she stood in this entryway waiting for you this whole time. You'll be all right. I know it. Now, I should get going myself," Shia said, squeezing his hand to quell his anxiety.

Kazuto gripped Shia's hand back. "Can't you stay with me for a little longer?" he whined.

"But... There's somewhere I must be off to."

"I know what Yuu said, but I...I'm still worried that Tetsu and Tomo will be angry with me... I'm scared."

Kazuto looked as if he might start crying any minute. He seemed to truly not want to be alone.

"Your mother will look out for you, I'm sure of it."

Kazuto furrowed his brow. Hesitantly, he opened his mouth to speak. "My Ma got sick and died two years ago," he mumbled quietly.

"I see..." It suddenly dawned upon Shia why Kazuto's sister was so responsible for her age.

At the entryway to his house, Kazuto explained his family situation to Shia. There were four children in the Tamiya household; himself, his two older brothers and his elder sister.

"My Dad's a long distance truck driver so he's gone days at a time. Tetsu has baseball and Tomo has

soccer practice. And as you've seen for yourself, Yuu's always "busy busy" with everything so...for the most part, I'm on my own," Kazuto said sadly.

With their father gone so much on business, the four of them had to split the daily chores equally and run the household together. Or, at least, they were supposed to split the chores equally. The reason Kazuto got into a fight with his brothers today was because right before they left for practice they tried to shove their cleaning duties onto Kazuto. They told him, "It's not like you have anything better to do."

Busy with school and activities, his middle school-aged brothers were unaware of Kazuto's loneliness, because he was the youngest.

After spilling his life's story to Shia, Kazuto held on to Shia's dress, not wanting to let go. "So please don't go yet. Just stay with me a little longer...*please?*"

"But...won't I be a nuisance?"

Shia tried to convince him again that she should go home, but he refused to give her even an inch, his hands planted firmly around the fabric of her skirt. Finally buckling to his persistence, she agreed to stay for just a little while, and stepped into his house.

"Nyaah..." The black cat let out a single, bored cry.



“Oh my, just look at this place!”

Shia was stunned at the sight before her. A large mountain of laundry had taken over what she assumed was the living room, while dirty jerseys and bags were thrown all over the place. Meanwhile, Kazuto's toys and video games were strewn here, there and everywhere, mostly in several pieces. There were some plastic containers where someone optimistically hoped items would be stored properly instead of being haphazardly stuffed in like they were presently.

Shia liked things neat and tidy, and she was quite proud of her housekeeping skills... Actually, she was the type who couldn't keep still if things were out of place, and before she knew it, her body started to tidy up of its own volition.

The moment Shia stepped foot into the living room, she immediately began to pick the magazines off the floor and order them. Kazuto watched, agape.

“You don't have to do that, Shia...”

But Shia wasn't listening. Her head was filled with thoughts and strategies for tidying up the room. In a sense, it was her mission.

“Do you have any homework today, Kazuto?”

Shia asked.

“Yeah, but I don’t want to do it yet. I’d rather be with you, Shia,” he said sweetly. Copying Shia, he also began to pick up the items around him.

“I want to clean this place up, so you have more room to stretch out.” Shia rolled up her sleeves and dug in. “First off, we need to fold all this laundry and create some sort of living space *to* clean.”

Plopping herself down in *seiza*⁶ in one corner of the room, Shia began to fold the laundry. Shia’s hands were like a machine, pressing each fold neatly and perfectly. She separated the items into two piles—one pile for shirts and other items that needed ironing, and a pile for towels and underwear.

Kazuto was completely floored by the speed and skill of Shia’s performance. “Wow, Shia, you’re amazing... Can I help at all?”

“Of course. Why don’t you start by picking up your toys?”

“Yes, ma’am!” Though he always hated picking up when his sister asked him to, when Shia asked, it felt different and he actually wanted to clean! His heart beat excitedly, and he glanced over at Shia. While he had been picking up his toys, she had loaded all the dirty clothes into the washing machine.

"See how much easier it makes it for us to clean now?"

Shia continued on—fingers flying—without showing any sign of stopping. "Excuse me, Kazuto, but would you be so kind as to lend me a broom?"

"A broom? Hmm... We don't have one of those, but we do have a vacuum cleaner."

He brought out the vacuum. A worried, "*How on Earth do I use this?*" sort of look flickered across Shia's face.

"Do you know how to use one of these?"

Though her ignorance surprised Kazuto, he showed her how. Shia picked it up right away and was back to cleaning in no time.

Gaaa gaaa gaah. It was well past seven at night, yet the sound of the vacuum cleaner roared throughout the house.

"Oh goodness. What a useful device this is," Shia said with an amazed and admiring smile on her face.

Hearing the wail of the vacuum, Yuu poked a puzzled face out of the kitchen, a large chopping knife in one hand. *There's no way one of my younger brothers would be cleaning up this late at night*, she thought. Seeing Shia in her living room cleaning, she did a double take.

“Um, what are you doing?”

“Oh, I’m sorry. I was cleaning,” Shia said with a very apologetic smile.

“I see that... But what I meant was...*why* are you cleaning?”

“Well... Since Kazuto helped me out earlier, I thought it the very least I could do to repay him for his kindness...”

“Oh no, you really don’t have to do that. Like I said, it puts us on the spot and...”

“Oh no...please don’t worry about me...”

“But that’s not the...”

“Yuu...was it? Something smells like it’s burning...”

“Oh shoot! I forgot...my meat and potato stew...!”

Although she wasn’t quite sure what to make of Shia, Yuu’s priority was not burning dinner. Without further argument, she rushed back into the kitchen.



Thirty minutes later, the living room was spic and span and wholly unrecognizable from its previous state.

"Whoa! I never knew our living room was *so* big! Gee, I might even be able to have some of my friends over now!" Kazuto exclaimed happily.

"It's such a refreshing feeling when things are clean like this, don't you agree? By the way, since it doesn't seem like dinner's quite ready, why don't you start on your homework, hmm?"

Nodding at Shia's suggestion, Kazuto went into his room and emerged with his backpack. He took a notebook from his bag and began to study. Next to him, Shia ironed some shirts and pants.

"It mists the clothes for you all by itself?"

"Eh? You haven't ever used an iron before, either?"

Putting his pencil down, Kazuto laughed a little at Shia, who stared at the iron, looking genuinely moved by its operation. He really couldn't help but enjoy himself. That warm, fuzzy air now permeated the entire house. Kazuto was so happy. If only Ma was here. It would be like this every day...

As he mulled over the idea, Yuu came into the living room to set up for dinner. The moment she stepped into the room, her eyes popped wide open.

"Oh my gosh, I can't believe it! I can't believe how clean this place is... I'm so sorry you had to tidy

up. But thank you..." Yuu said, utterly awe-struck by the living room. She bowed her head deeply towards Shia.

"Please don't thank me. Kazuto helped me tidy up too, so it wasn't a chore at all."

"Kazuto?" Yuu glanced at Kazuto in disbelief. Kazuto puffed his chest out again as if to say, "Heh heh."

Yuu glared at her little brother. "Are you kidding me? The same Kazuto that I yell at a dozen times and won't lift a finger...? Look at you, trying to make a good impression. What a little stinker."

"Well then, I really ought to be leaving now," Shia said, finishing up the last of the ironing.

As she stood to leave, Yuu stopped her. "Oh, please don't say that. I'm not sure if it's any good, but why don't you stay for dinner? Please? I'd feel so much better if you stayed, especially after everything you've done for us."

"Yeah, stay for dinner!" Kazuto exclaimed. "It'll taste terrible, but please do."

"Hey, you don't get to say that, Kazuto! Just me!" Yuu snapped, smacking Kazuto on the top of his head.

Kazuto howled in pain, but both he and Yuu

laughed. *Only family that trusted one another implicitly could ever be so rough and yet so compassionate at the same time*, Shia thought. Just watching them with each other brought peace to her heart.

"I'm home. Uh, what the...?! What the heck happened here?!"

"Yo, Tomoki, what are you hollering about...? Whoa, what the—?! Are you serious?!!"

The two reasons that made Kazuto cry in the first place, Teppei and Tomoki, had finally come home. Seeing the living room as clean as it was, they hesitated at the entryway, unsure if they were at the right house.

"It's clean, so don't even think of coming in here all dirty like that," Yuu said as if she had been personally responsible for cleaning the place.

"Fine fine... But, *man*, is it *clean* in here."

"Yeah, seriously. Guess you ain't going in with those dirty socks, huh, Teppei?"

"Ahh, be quiet, Tomo!"

Muttering to themselves, the two went around to the back of the house to shake the dirt from their clothes and shoes.

Not long after that, their father, Kouhei, returned home. It was just a little past eight o'clock at night.

"Why, I almost didn't recognize this place... What

the heck happened here?"

Hearing the entire family react in the same surprised manner, Shia couldn't help but giggle to herself.



Once everyone cleaned up and assembled at the dinner table, Shia was reintroduced to the entire Tamiya family.

Kouhei was the father. Yuu was the oldest and only daughter. She was a junior in high school. Teppei was the oldest son. He was in ninth grade, while Tomoki, the next oldest son, was in seventh grade. Kazuto was the youngest of the four and in second grade. They had lived in the lower part of the city all their lives and carried little, if any, of the often-snobby uptown air. In fact, they opened up to Shia in no time at all.

"Thank you so much for what you've done. I feel like I owe you so much," Kouhei said with a deep bow of his head.

Shia smiled brightly at his words. "Oh, please don't thank me. I love cleaning and scullery work."

"Scullery work? What's that? I've never heard of

it." Tomoki said.

"Scullery is an older word," Yuu said. "It means 'kitchen work' or something like 'general housekeeping.' That's right, I think. Right? Dad?" She sounded a little nervous about her answer.

"That's right. But you look so young, Shia. How did you know a word like that?"

"Don't you think it's *weird* she knows such an old-fashioned word?" Tomoki asked.

"Tomo, that was very rude. Apologize to Shia."

Tomoki immediately bowed his head in apology. "I'm sorry."

"It's all right... I wasn't aware it was such an old word." Shia had such a dubious look on her face the Tamiyas couldn't help but laugh.

"It's like you're from a whole other time, Shia!" Kazuto hadn't had such an enjoyable dinner in a very long time. His heart was almost filled to bursting with happiness.

Talking about little things here and there, night ripened upon the Tamiya household.

"Nyaaaah!" the black cat cried, "*We should get going.*"

"Well then, I ought to be going. Yuu, your meat and potato stew was very delicious. Thank you so

much for the meal." Sitting in *seiza*, Shia bowed to each family member in a formal farewell.

"Aww, come on, Shia! Stay the night! It's late and even your cat's crying to say he's sleepy, the poor thing," Kazuto said, grabbing hold of Shia's hand as she moved to get up.

"Nyah! Nyah! Nyaah!! *That's definitely not what I said!*," the cat meowed angrily.

"Kazuto's right. It is rather late... Not right for a young lady to have to walk home at this hour. Why don't you stay?" Kouhei offered.

"Yeah, Shia, stay the night," Yuu said in support of her father's suggestion. "We even have a room for you. It's a bit on the old side though..."

"Hey, no need to call it old," Kouhei said. "As long as it keeps the rain off your head, you should be happy. You know what they say: Home is where you hang your hat. Home is what you make of it..."

"Oh no, Dad's launching into one of his speeches again. Yes yes, everything's perspective, we know," Teppei said quickly to cut him off.

Everyone laughed.

Just hearing their laughter soothed the kinks in Shia's heart. They were all such good people...So, pushed by every member of the Tamiya household,

Shia decided to stay the night.

(All right, fine. Do it your way. But don't come crying to me if something goes wrong. This is your decision—you have to live with it.)

"Yes..." Shia mumbled as she gazed upon the black cat.

Kazuto looked from Shia to the black cat. "Wow, Shia. It almost looks like you're talking to your cat," he said with an odd look on his face.

"It feels a little like...I can understand what he's saying..."

The black cat sneezed, a tiny cat sneeze, and began to clean his face with his paw.

Seeing the discomfort in the black cat's manner, Shia bowed her head deeply to him again.

"It seems like this cat's got an attitude problem, doesn't it? It's totally being arrogant. So what's its name anyway?" Tomoki asked.

Shia blinked with uncertainty. She had no idea how to address him in the Human world. "I just started keeping him so, I haven't decided on a name yet..."

Kazuto snapped his fingers. "You haven't? Well, why don't we call him Kuro⁷, 'cause he's black."

"But that's so...obvious, don't you think?" Teppei said in a bored tone.

"The thing about names and life is to keep it simple, stupid! So Kuro it is! Kuro!" Kouhei said, making the decision for the entire group.

"Yes, maybe you're right. Simple probably is best," Shia nodded.

Seeing Shia's consent, the black cat mewed loudly in protest. *"I don't want a lame name like that! Do something about it, Shia!"*

"Oh my, it looks like he loves the name too, so Kuro it certainly is," Yuu stated firmly, brilliantly misinterpreting the cat's cries.

"No! I'm telling you I don't want that insipid name! Ohhhhh, fine! Whatever!"

So the Tamiya family caucus decided Shia's black cat would henceforth be referred to as "Kuro." (At least until someone else came along and renamed him...)

After cleaning off the table, Shia took a long, leisurely bath. How long had it been since she had last taken a hot bath? The warm water felt wonderful as it washed over her, and filled her with delight. She borrowed a pair of Yuu's pajamas to sleep in and returned to the living room to find Kouhei sitting alone, nursing a beer.

"Oh, thank you so much for allowing me to

bathe..."

"No problem. Shia, judging from your speech, your manners and your knowledge of the old ways... I'm guessing you're the daughter of a well-to-do family of some sort, aren't you? I bet it surprised the heck out of you to come into a house filled with such a rowdy, simple bunch, eh?"

"Oh no, not at all... Actually, I'm quite impressed. I think everybody's absolutely wonderful. Even without a mother figure, you're all so bright, happy and strong... I feel at such ease around your family."

"Thanks. Hearing you say that really makes me glad. I haven't told them, but I'm beyond grateful they all grew up to be such good kids. By the way, Shia, forgive me for saying this, but...do you really have anywhere to go?" Kouhei asked with a serious expression on his face.

"I..."

The words stuck in Shia's throat. She didn't know how to answer his question.

"Like I thought. Look, I'm a truck driver. I've been all over the place, seen and met lots of people. It's made me quite good at noticing and understanding other people's problems... Anyhow, what I'm trying

to say is, until you figure out where it is you want or need to go, you're welcome to stay with us. There's already an army of us, so it won't make a bit of difference if you do..."

At first, Shia thought to decline his invitation, then she mulled over her situation. She had yet to find what she was looking for and, having just arrived in the Human world, her senses were still dull. It would be smarter to stay here until she was fully recovered instead of wandering about aimlessly. Plus, there was Kazuto to consider, whom she had grown quite attached to...

Shia bowed, both a gesture of thanks for the invitation and advance apology for the inconvenience.

"Nyaahhh," Kuro cried grumpily.



In the morning, Shia woke up before anyone else and began to make breakfast out of what she could find in the kitchen.

"Wow, this is awesome!"

Though it was simple fare consisting of rice, miso soup, some grilled fish and pickles, the Tamiya Household was ecstatic. Yuu, in particular, who normally

had the task of making breakfast, was the happiest of the lot, grinning ear to ear like she had won a free pass from work.

The two brothers looked at the decadent breakfast, their eyes wide.

"Man, we haven't had a Japanese breakfast in so long."

"I've always wanted to eat something like this. I mean, like, you can't give it your all for the whole day without a good meal, ya know?!"

"Oh, be quiet, you two. I've got school too, you know! I can't spend all my time making breakfast. Especially a traditional one like this. It just takes too long!" Yuu grumbled. *They didn't have to praise her that much*, she thought a little enviously. Yeah, sure Yuu's breakfasts were mainly hastily filled bowls of rice and leftovers. But still, she tried her best, and having the two boys drooling all over Shia's meal didn't put her in the greatest of moods.

"I think Yuu's breakfasts are delicious too," Kazuto said, seeing his sister's face.

"Really?" Yuu replied, and immediately reverted to her former happy self.

Kouhei got everyone's attention. "Now, you guys, there's something I need to tell you. A few things came



up yesterday, and it's been decided that Shia will be staying with us for a little while. I hope you'll all be very nice to her and make her stay pleasant."

Shia bowed deeply to the family as she spoke. "I'm very, very sorry for this inconvenience, but...until I find my way, your father has been kind enough to allow me to stay here. So please, if there's anything I can help you with, so long as it's in my power, please do not hesitate to ask it of me."

"Yippee! Shia gets to stay with us! I'm soo happy!" Kazuto exclaimed and hopped around with joy.

His siblings also seemed quite happy, thinking how much easier it would make things for them. With the unanimous approval of the entire family, Shia began her life at the Tamiya Household.

2

“Have a wonderful day.”

After breakfast, the Tamiya crew immediately scrambled into the entryway to get ready for school. Shia stood with them to send them off, and a photograph hanging on the wall caught her eye. There was a woman in the picture with the same big, bright eyes as Kazuto and a warm smile on her lips. Over a plain, worn polo shirt she had a luxurious shawl draped across her shoulders, which seemed rather out of place.

Yuu noticed Shia gazing at the picture. “That’s our Ma. We got her that shawl for her birthday. Ma never had anything fancy in her wardrobe, so we all just chipped in one year and bought it for her...” she explained. There was a faraway look in her eyes.

“She kept saying how she didn’t have anywhere to wear such a nice shawl...but she had this big ole smile on her face the whole time she was wearing it,”

Teppei said. He raised his hand toward the picture and said, "I'm off to school, Ma." And with that, he and Tomoki left.

To Shia, it seemed as if their mother's picture mouthed the words, "Take care," as they left.

So Shia's life as a boarder with the Tamiya Household began. Of course, her black cat, Kuro, was always at her side. Not a day passed without Kuro griping about how he couldn't wait to leave the wretched place.

Meanwhile, Shia threw herself into the housework. She felt it was the least she could do since they had been so kind to let her stay with them without asking for anything from her.

She fixed the torn paper in the sliding doors, and used an old toothbrush to both scrub the dirt off the windows and scour each and every corner of the kitchen until it sparkled. She aired out the futons, she did the laundry, took the initiative to perform many other household related tasks, and kept the place spotless. Quite often she took over dinner duty for Yuu.

To everyone in the Tamiya Household, they felt as if their quality of life had shot up by half. In particular, Shia's traditional Japanese stewed dishes—which Yuu had always hated to make—were the biggest hit, and

had Kouhei smacking his lips all meal long.

"Man, we haven't had something this good in a very long time," Kouhei praised as he sampled her stew.

Even though Yuu told her she didn't have to do so much, Shia simply smiled and said she wanted to. Shia's cleaning was infectious; even Teppei and Tomoki began to pick up their own rooms occasionally, saying they felt bad for Shia having to work so hard.

"I can't believe you guys. You never picked up when I asked you to, but Shia shows up and you're all clean-a-holics," Yuu complained as the lot of them assembled over dinner one evening.

Both Teppei and Tomoki countered Yuu's complaint.

"Well, it's so clean around here lately, I feel like we shouldn't mess anything up."

"Weren't you the one that was all psyched over how you could go out with your friends again, Yuu?"

"Well, yeah, but... I mean, don't get me wrong. I'm totally appreciative of all Shia's done for us. But I feel bad, too, having her do so much..."

"Oh, please don't worry about that. I truly want to do all this for you all..." Shia said with a smile,

overjoyed they appreciated her efforts.

Kouhei put his chopsticks down just long enough to gush. "You don't find women who love to clean and cook so much nowadays. You'll make a good wife for some man one day."

"Oh, that's right, because my cooking's not good enough, is it?" Yuu huffed.

"Don't forget how strong-willed you are too," Tomoki said. "Way too strong willed, if you ask me, Yuu."

"Tomo, you went too far with that," Teppei snapped. But there was truth in everything he said, and Yuu couldn't help but feel a bit down.

Since Shia's been here, she's been nothing but helpful, Yuu thought. We can be late from practice, I can go out shopping with my friends and it's all fun. And yet...there's something...wrong.

For one, Kazuto was stuck like glue to Shia the moment he came back from school.

"Guess what, Shia! Guess what happened to me today!" he'd tell her, his hands gripped firmly around her apron string. He would be like that for hours at a time.

The longer the conversation went on about Shia, the worse and worse Yuu felt about herself.

"You need to stop hanging on Shia so much. She needs her space too, you know," Yuu warned Kazuto.

"Why should I? Do you really feel that way? Shia?"

"Oh my, not at all. I love having you around, Kazuto..."

"I see. In that case, fine... But if Kazuto does something naughty, you have to scold him too, Shia," Yuu told her.

"Oh just be quiet, Yuu!" Kazuto said.

"Why you!!" She made the pretend motion of raising her hand like she was going to hit Kazuto. *Ugh, even Kazuto's got something to say about all this! I mean, sure it makes me happy the house is clean. I've got fewer chores to worry about and I finally get to go and hang out with my friends like I always wanted too. Why do I feel so irritated and upset? What about me? Have they all forgotten everything I did for them up until now? Is there even room for me...in this house anymore?*

As the days passed, Yuu's thoughts sent her lower and lower. There was no one left to comfort her and raise her up.

Meanwhile, Shia cherished each moment she spent with this family. She loved sitting down together

for dinner, and she adored the open and unconditional relationship they shared with one another. To Shia, living each day as if she were a true part of the Tamiya family made her overwhelmingly happy.

"Are you really happy like this?"

Each day, Kuro asked her the same question, and each day Kuro tried to persuade Shia to leave. But she didn't. She wouldn't even consider it, not yet. She wanted to stay just a little longer in her haven, enveloped by its sunny warmth and comfort.



One day when Shia was cleaning out the closets, she stumbled upon a large cardboard box. Inside the box, she found dozens and dozens of fabric pieces in all colors and sizes.

Shia wanted to make something for everyone out of the fabrics. With the best intentions in mind, she approached Yuu, carrying the box in her arms.

"Excuse me, Yuu. I was wondering if I might use some of this fabric?"

Yuu made a complicated face, but then nodded. "Sure. Not like I'm going to use it...right now, anyways."

"Thank you so much. Oh, and if you have one, might I borrow your sewing box?"

"Yeah. But, Shia, look... You really don't have to ask about everything...really. You do a lot of things for us, after all. So you can keep doing what you want with the house...everything if you really want," Yuu said curtly, unable to look into Shia's face.

Filled with self-loathing at the sort of person she was becoming, Yuu ran out of the house.

"Oh, take care!" Shia called out as brightly as ever. But Yuu did not hear her.

As quickly as Yuu had stepped out, Tomoki stepped in.

"I'm home! Say, did Yuu go out again?"

"Yes."

"Man, she sure leaves you to do everything, huh? I'm really sorry."

"Oh, please don't feel that way. I'm enjoying myself, honestly. I love being here... Goodness, it's almost dinnertime, isn't it? Would you give me a moment, please?" Smiling as she always did, Shia disappeared into the kitchen.

Every afternoon since discovering the cardboard box, whenever she had a moment to herself, Shia worked on a sewing project using the colorful fabrics.

She kept her project a secret from the family and the anticipation of unveiling the surprise filled her with even more bliss.

"I'm finally done, I only hope they like what I've made for them," Shia murmured one evening as she gazed over her finished products. They had taken her five days to complete.

She decided she would hand out her gifts to everyone after dinner. While she seemed her usual, calm self as they ate, her heart raced within her chest.

"Excuse me, everyone. Since you've all been so kind to me during my stay here, I made a few things for you... I hope you'll find some use for them," she announced at the end of dinner.

She began to hand each family member her hand-made gift.

"For you, sir... I made a little pillow for when you get tired and have to sleep in your truck."

"*Ohh*, now this is nice! Looks mighty comfortable too!" Kouhei said, immediately placing his head on it to test its softness.

"For Teppei and Tomoki, I made you both a drawstring bag you can put your baseball and soccer uniforms in. I thought it might help to keep your normal gym clothes cleaner since you can keep them

separate.”

The two boys beamed with gratitude.

“Thanks. It’s a bit gaudy, but it’s nice.”

“Come on, Tetsu, that’s rude. Thank you so much, Shia. I’ll definitely use it.”

“For you, Yuu, I made an apron.”

“Thank you...” Yuu didn’t know what else to say, so she said nothing else.

“And for you, Kazuto, *this*. You can put a handkerchief in it. That way you don’t forget, hmm?” she smiled as she handed Kazuto an apple shaped pouch.

Kazuto leapt with joy, jumping to his feet to give the *kotatsu*⁸ a couple of victory laps, complete with whooping.

“Do you like apples, Shia?”

“Oh yes. I love their color...and how they sort of look heart shaped. When you hold one in your hands, it’s as if you’re holding someone’s heart and that’s...so very comforting to me. Is it too feminine for you...?”

“No, not at all. I’ll take extra good care of it. Ma...she liked apples too, just like you, Shia. And that’s why I like ‘em a lot too! ...I was too young to remember much else about her before she passed away,

but one thing that sticks in my mind is the image of Ma eating an apple. Carrying this around...it'll feel like I've got my Ma close to me all the time!" Kazuto said without stopping. He flashed a huge smile at Shia.

"That's right. Around this time of the year, we used to sit around like this with your Ma and eat apples, didn't we?" Kouhei said, reminiscing.

Teppei and Tomoki also both seemed to be in apple mode.

"All of a sudden I want apples."

"Say, do we have any apples in the house, Yuu?"

"How should I know? I didn't buy any. For that matter, I don't even go shopping anymore..." Yuu snapped. She felt it was completely unreasonable that, somehow, they blamed her for not having apples in the house.

"Oh, I'm sorry. I didn't know you all liked apples so much...I'll make sure to purchase some tomorrow," Shia said apologetically.

"What's up with you, Yuu?" Tepei said. "You didn't have to say it like that. Don't try and make it like it's Shia's fault when it's not!"

"Well, excuse me. But this is how I talk and that's how I say things. I have homework to do..." Infuriated

by Teppei's accusation, Yuu spit out the words and went up to her room on the second floor.

"Geez. What's wrong with her lately? She's all prickly all the time. Did she get dumped by her boyfriend or something?" Tomoki muttered, a dumbfounded look on his face as he watched her leave.

"Now now, she's that age, remember. This old man is quite clueless when it comes to teenage girls so I have no idea what she's thinking," Kouhei remarked. He folded his arms across his chest. "If your Ma was still around, things might be different. But girls...I just don't understand them."

Sitting next to his father, Teppei glanced at his drawstring bag. "Shia...where did you get this cloth? It looks...really familiar for some reason."

"Oh, I found it in the closet. It was in a big cardboard box brimming with fabrics..."

"Oh, that's Ma's fabric box!" Smacking a balled up fist onto his open palm, Tomoki began to speak, eyes alight with memories of the past. "Ma was really good at sewing. When we were small, she used to make all our clothes."

"That's right! She used to gather all these fabrics that the old ladies in the neighborhood weren't using anymore," Teppei added. "She always thought she'd

be able to reuse them one day and make something out of them... Man, we still had that box, did we?" The warmth of the memories flickered over his face as he spoke.

"Yeah...remember when...?"

The four men gathered at the table began to share their memories of their mother and wife.

Shia simply smiled as she listened to their stories. It must have taken a very long time to be able to speak so brightly about someone who had passed away. Usually, when a person's sorrow was too deep, they hardly ever—if at all—brought it up in everyday conversation.

Yuu quietly came down from the second floor. Hiding behind a sliding door, she watched the lot of them.

How dare they? They don't even care when I'm mad. Instead, they're just sitting there, having a good old time talking about Ma. And those things Shia made...how despicable of her. How dare she use the cloth Ma was saving up? I should have told her no in the first place... I should have told her she couldn't use it...

Yuu knew how to do a great many things when it came to housework. But one thing she wasn't very

good at yet was sewing. She always thought that after some practice, one day she'd be as good as her mother. And when she was, she was hoping to surprise everyone by making them all something to wear or use. She had been planning this for quite some time now, but now her plans were all ruined, stolen right from under her feet by Shia.

She knew Shia hadn't done it out of spite. In fact, she really liked the apron Shia made for her. She was also very appreciative of all the work Shia did around the house. But ever since Shia arrived on their front door, this house...was no longer hers!

3

A few days later, right before it was time to head off for school, Kazuto handed a sheet of paper to his father. It was a notice from the school.

"We're having a Class Participation Day⁹ at school. Will you come?"

"But wait...isn't this today? What's the matter with you, boy?" He gave Kazuto a light rap on the head. "You've got to give me advance notice or I can't take off from work! What the heck am I gonna do about this now...?" Kouhei fell into deep thought as he scratched his head.

Kazuto glared at his father, an angry pout on his face. "But I gave you plenty of notice last time and you still didn't show up! I don't want to be all by myself again..."

"Did you ask your big sister yet? Couldn't she go in my place?"

"Yuu? But she's got school... I want you to come,

Dad!" Kazuto whined. He wasn't about to budge on this.

"You're right. I can't make Yuu take a day off for this. I already make her take enough days off for Sports Days and the boys' games. I put too much responsibility on that girl to begin with. What to do, what to do...?"

From the kitchen, Shia overheard the two speaking as she washed the morning dishes. She wanted to help out in any way she could, so, drying off her hands, she entered the living room where Kazuto and Kouhei stood.

"Excuse me, but...I could go in your place. If it's all right with you, of course."

"What? Seriously? You wouldn't mind doing that?" Kazuto asked incredulously. Inside, he was screaming, "Yes yes yes!" A broad smile crept onto his face.

"I can't let you do that, Shia. You're already doing so much for us..."

"You're letting me stay with you, so please don't feel that way. If there's any way at all I can be of assistance to your family, I want to."

"Aww, come on, Dad," Kazuto said, tugging at his father's sleeve.

In his mind, Kazuto had already decided Shia was going with him to school. Kouhei saw that, and didn't want to crush Kazuto's dreams. He felt guilty about never being able to make it to Kazuto's Class Participation Days, and he wanted to make things right for once. So he made the decision.

"Well, if that's all right with you, Kazuto... I'll call your teachers and explain the situation to them. I'll tell them she's a cousin or something. ...Shia, are you sure you're okay with this too?"

"Of course."

"Don't worry about attending the gathering at the end, though."

"Yippee! Huh? Oh no! I've gotta get going!" Noticing the time and knowing he might be late to school, Kazuto ran out of the house.

"Man, that boy! He never hands me those notices from school on time. Such a pain in the you-know-where, I swear. He's just so forgetful sometimes... Anyway, I'm really sorry for troubling you with something like this, but...thank you. Seems you just need to show up for third period and...all you need to do is watch over him... Oh, and *here*. On the way back, go ahead and take him and yourself out for some ice cream or something."

Placing some money in Shia's palm with one hand and putting his right hand in front of his face, in a half-prayer, as if to say, "Thank you so much," Kouhei rushed out of the house as well.



"Well, I suppose I should get ready then."

Shia quickly finished the cleaning and laundry. Thinking about how she didn't want Teppei and the others to wait with an empty stomach until she came home, she made an apple pie and placed it on the table. Next to the pie, she also left a little note.

I shall be attending Kazuto's Class Participation Day. I promise to be back by dinnertime, but should you be hungry, please help yourself to some apple pie! ^_^

- Shia

"Well then, I'd best be off!" Shia proclaimed happily, after performing a once over of the house to ensure everything was in order.

I wonder what one does at a Class Participation Day? With that thought on her mind and an airy skip in

her step, she started towards the entryway of the house. Kuro was waiting, a serious look on his face.

"You're making a grave mistake."

"Did I do something wrong?"

"You did. If you don't know what, then it can't be helped. So I'll just say to you what I've said from the very beginning... you mustn't remain here for too long..."

"I'm doing...something wrong?" Shia did not understand, nor did she have the time to try and understand. Class Participation Day and third period were closing in.

Shia put Kuro's words on the back burner while she made her way to Kazuto's school. But once she was there, they came back to her. The thought she was doing something wrong...it echoed through her mind.



The moment Shia stepped into Kazuto's classroom, the whispers began.

"Whose mom is that?"

"That's someone's sister, isn't it? No way anyone's mom could be that young and pretty."

Curious voices and glances were exchanged

throughout the classroom.

Kazuto knew right away who they were whispering about, and happiness flooded into his heart. He looked to the back of the class and waved to Shia. Shia smiled a lovely smile, and waved back.

From the seat next to him, Kazuto's friend leaned over and whispered in Kazuto's ear. "Yo, who is that? I know it's not your sister."

"It's my older cousin. She's visiting, so she came in place of my dad."

"She's way hot. You better introduce us later."

"No way!"

It felt so good. During other Class Participation Days, Kazuto had mostly been on his own but now everything had changed for the better.

Shia was just as happy as Kazuto.



"What the heck is the meaning of this?!" Yuu screamed, shaking with anger. She was first to read the note after coming home from school.

Kazuto's Class Participation Day? No one told me he was having one today! And why the heck did Shia go to it anyway?! She's not even family! This is insane...it's

just utterly and completely unacceptable!

"Trying to buy us off with an apple pie is she?! The nerve! But it doesn't work on me! No!" Furious, Yuu threw the apple pie into the garbage.

At that moment, both Teppei and Tomoki came home. "What are you doing, Yuu?"

Though taken aback by Yuu's twisted face, Tomoki inched towards the trash bin. Seeing the discarded pie, he couldn't help but yell at Yuu. "Oh man, what a waste! Shia made that, didn't she? Why'd you go and throw it out?!"

All of them. The whole ungrateful lot of them. All they talk about is Shia. All they care about is Shia...

Yuu was angrier than ever. Then a wave of sadness hit her. "If you like Shia that much, why don't you ask her to be your sister instead?! That way I won't have to look after this stupid house or you guys any more," she said sullenly as she raced upstairs.

Left by themselves, Teppei and Tomoki exchanged stunned glances.

"What the heck just happened?"

"No clue..."

Upstairs by herself, Yuu still trembled with rage. Glancing into the first room of the hall, she saw the

apple shaped pouch Shia made for Kazuto, sitting on his desk. She slowly walked to it.

“Just because...you made something like this, don’t act like you’re part of the family,” she spat out, glaring at the pouch. Something about it seemed so vile to her.

An image of Kazuto snuggling up to Shia popped into her mind. Without thinking, Yuu picked up the pouch and brought it to her room. She hid it in the back of her desk drawer. She looked up from her desk, and saw Shia’s handmade apron. Before she knew what she was doing, she took the apron and began to rip it into shreds.

Why doesn’t anyone understand me?!

Screaming the words inside her head, Yuu threw the torn-apart apron into the hall and slammed her door shut.

Kuro, who had just returned from his daily walk, sat quietly in the hallway and simply stared at Yuu’s door.



Moments later, Kazuto and Shia returned home. Kazuto couldn’t have looked happier as he walked

through the door holding hands with Shia.

"We're back! And guess what?! Shia went to Class Participation Day with me and everyone in the class was like, 'Wow,' and then like..."

"I'm terribly sorry for coming home so late, everyone. I'll start on dinner right away... *Hmm?* Is something the matter?" Shia asked, sensing something odd about Teppei and Tomoki's behavior.

The two boys nodded at one another, then looked up towards the second floor.

"So that's it."

"Now I get it..."

"Is it Yuu? Is something wrong with her?" Shia asked.

Teppei stared up at the ceiling. "Something happened and she went into hysterics...now she's gone and locked herself in her room."

"I think she's jealous of you, Shia," Tomoki said quietly, his eyes moving apologetically to the trash bin.

Shia glanced inside, and seeing the remains of the apple pie, was rendered speechless. As the four stood there in silence, Kouhei arrived home. After hearing about the situation, he let out a big sigh.

"But why? I couldn't make it, so I practically

forced her to go for me. Haven't things been easier for her too since Shia came...? All right, let me see if I can go talk some sense into her."

Kouhei walked upstairs and stood in front of Yuu's door. It was closed tight, so Kouhei spoke to Yuu through the door. Shia, Teppei and the others hovered behind Kouhei and watched anxiously.

"Yuu, listen to me. The only reason I didn't say anything to you about Class Participation Day this time around was because I thought I'd forced enough on your plate already. I don't see why you'd be so upset about that."

"What are you talking about—of course I'd be upset! You could have at least told me. So what if I had a lot on my plate? We're family! For family, even when things are crazy, you try your best and find a way to pull through. That's why we're family in the first place. You just don't get it, do you, Dad? I know I'm not as good as Shia around the house but I've given all that I can give. But lately...all you guys have done is push me away and alienate me...I bet you don't even need me around here anymore! Maybe you'd all be happier if I were gone!"

"No one ever said or even thought that. I didn't mean to do it but if you were hurt by my actions, then

I apologize. So please, Yuu, come out of there."

As Yuu and Kouhei exchanged heated words through the door, ice ran through Shia's veins. She bowed her head. She finally understood what Kuro had been trying to tell her. Because of her prolonged presence, she had managed to upset the balance of the Tamiya family. Realizing what she had done, Shia's heart was flooded with regret for all she put Yuu through.

"I've done things I shouldn't have and hurt Yuu in the process... I should have noticed it sooner, and for that, I truly apologize."

Both Teppei and Tomoki were apologetic.

"Nah, we didn't think about Yuu's feelings either. Since Ma passed away, we've been so dependent on her. She's been our rock and yet..."

"Come on, Yuu, don't be like that. We get it and we're sorry."

Kazuto, on the other hand, was a different story. "This is so stupid. Why'd you have to make it so Shia's the bad guy? Especially when you enjoyed having her around too...?"

Yuu shouted from the other side of the door. "If you like her so much, then why don't you just leave us and become her kid!"

In all honesty, Yuu's anger had been quenched the moment everyone walked up to her room to apologize. She knew full well she was acting like a brat, merely having a temper tantrum. Because she had always been the adult before, telling the others what to do and what not to do, now she wasn't quite sure how to pull herself out of the hole she created for herself. Kazuto saw right through her act and called her on it, and she said those horrible things out of spite, but in her heart, she hadn't meant any of it. *What...what am I going to do now? How am I going to get out of this?*

Shia felt that all she could do was apologize. "Yuu, I'm so sorry for everything."

On the floor sat the apron she made for Yuu. Seeing it in tatters, Shia knew just how hurt Yuu was.

"Stop that, Shia!" Yuu shouted. "I don't want you to apologize! This is a family matter!"

There was nothing more Shia could say.

In the midst of the silence, Kazuto too noticed the torn apron, and a terrible possibility hit him.

My pouch... Yuu...did she...?

His stomach turned upside down and he ran into his room.

It's gone! Could she really have...?

"My apple pouch is gone. Do you know where

it is, Yuu?"

"I took that stupid thing and threw it out on the mountain out back," Yuu said, furious. Kazuto's tone brought back Yuu's anger just long enough for her to spit out the lie. *I can't believe he's more worried about his stupid little pouch than me!*

"How could you, Yuu?! Yeah, Shia made it, but to me it wasn't just about Shia! It was my special apple that I could keep close and use to remember Ma! I hate you, Yuu! I hate you!"

The force of his words hit Yuu hard and sent her reeling. Stunned, she opened the door. Kazuto glared up into her face, eyes filled with hot tears.

"Kazuto..." Yuu was barely able to whisper his name. Kazuto's unforgiving eyes took any other words right out of her mouth.

"You think...you think you're the only person who's suffered? Do you have any idea how lonely I've been all this time? But I tried my best to deal with it. Then Shia came...and I was happy. And I was happy because...all a sudden we were sitting down for dinner together again. That was the best part of all...because I remember how it used to be... How we used to eat separately... things changed. We were together again...and it was fun to just sit around and

talk about all sorts of things. It was so much fun, but you...you didn't see any of that!"

Kazuto managed to get it all out, despite being interrupted every so often by short outbursts of tears. When he was finished, he ran down the steps and out of the house.

Shia immediately started after him. "Kazuto... wait...!"

Kuro was beside her suddenly, mewing out his theories. "*You got too comfortable and you stopped thinking about how your presence might affect those around you. That's why all of this happened.*"

Shia simply nodded. "You're absolutely right. All this time, I thought I was making everyone happy...in truth I went too far."

"*You mustn't involve yourself with humans so much, Shia.*"

"I'm going to look for Kazuto. It's my fault."

"No, it's our fault too! All of us! Let's go together," Kouhei said flatly, his arms around Shia and Yuu's shoulders.



Under the dim glow of night, they scoured the

city, but found no sign of Kazuto anywhere. Each of them regretted not seeing sooner what was wrong with their youngest brother.

Eventually the three siblings, Yuu, Teppei and Tomoki, who had split up to look for Kazuto, reunited on the street that led home. They all came back that way in hopes Kazuto decided to come home.

"I'm so sorry, guys. I was so mean...to everyone," Yuu said sadly.

When Yuu apologized so sincerely, the two boys couldn't help but shake their heads sheepishly. "Don't worry about it. We should have taken your feelings into account too," Teppei said.

"But, you know how guys are," Tomoki chimed in. "They're no good at saying thanks out loud. We all thought it, though... But I suppose there comes a time when you've gotta man up and just go ahead and say it...even among family. So thanks. We really do appreciate you...honestly."

"Thanks, sis!"

"Oh stop, you don't have to force yourselves like that." Yuu's words trembled with tears of joy. She couldn't believe a simple "thank you" could be both so powerful and so fulfilling... But her happiness about being appreciated was short-lived, washed away by

the renewed regret of her ignorance. Kazuto had not come home.

"Alrighty, let's head out again and find him with Sibling Power!" Teppei exclaimed.

Kouhei, watching his children band together from the entryway, sniffled a little and wiped his nose.

Tomoki glanced at his father. "By the way, where's Shia?"

"She came back not too long ago, but...then she said she was going back out to look again. Oh yeah, she kept going on and on about Kazuto's pouch," Kouhei said.

Suddenly Yuu knew where Kazuto was headed.

"That's it! The mountain out back! Remember I said I threw his pouch out there? Kazuto's probably there right now, looking for it..." Yuu furrowed her brow with worry. "But the footing there's horrible."

She took off. *He's got to be there! If so, he could be in a lot of danger! It just rained. The footing's awful to begin with but when it's wet, it's even worse...*

"Let's go!" Kouhei told Teppei and Tomoki.

They ran as they fast as they could toward the mountain.

4

The dark of night was thicker than Shia ever imagined. *Where are you, Kazuto? You've got to be here somewhere...*

Shia decided to trust her senses and climb the mountain. It was pitch black around her but she wasn't scared. Watching the ground closely, she noticed the impression of tiny sneakers in the dirt halfway up the mountain. "Now I'm sure of it. He had to have come this way."

"Kazuto!" Loud and clear, she continued to call his name as she walked.



Kazuto meticulously combed the grass and surrounding bushes with his flashlight in search of his pouch.

I wonder where she threw it? I hope she didn't

throw it off the cliff that's up ahead. I don't know how I'd get it if it's down there. But I will if I have to. I've got to get that pouch back, because it's a memory of Ma that Shia made for me. Hmm? What's that? Something's caught over there...

Kazuto reached out towards the trunk of a tree that grew on the mountain slope.

Tip.

“Waaahhh!”

Losing his balance, Kazuto tipped forward and began to roll down the side of the mountain.

“Kazuto?”

Rattle rattle... It was the sound of a flashlight tumbling over and off the cliff.

Shia thought she heard a scream along with the rattle. Without a thought for her own safety, Shia concentrated on pinpointing the direction of the noise, and ran toward it as fast as she could.

“Is that you, Kazuto?”

“Shia...”

Shia came across Kazuto, who was perched precariously on a tree root that grew out of the side of the cliff.

“Are you all right? I’m going to help you up, so just hang on.” Shia looked carefully at the area around

her and tested her footing. Then slowly, with one hand holding onto a nearby tree, she leaned forward and extended her hand to Kazuto.

"Oww!"

He must be hurt somehow, because even with Shia extending herself fully, Kazuto wasn't able to walk towards her.

Rip rip rip...

As Shia leaned forward, she heard the sound of bark snapping. But it didn't come from the tree she held. It came from the tree root Kazuto stood on.

At this rate, it would break any minute and Kazuto would fall. She had to do something.

"Don't move until I get there, okay?"

Shia carefully slid herself two meters down the side of the mountain until she was adjacent to Kazuto and the tree root. The slope of the mountain side made it definitely easier to go down than up, and from where she sat the climb up seemed daunting at the very least. But getting back up was the last thing on her mind. Right now, Kazuto was her priority.

With some effort, Shia made it to the tree root. She took his hand and gripped it tightly in hers.

"Shia...your pouch...I can't find it..."

The item Kazuto had mistaken for his pouch was

actually a red handkerchief someone must have lost while hiking.

“Don’t worry about that right now. I’ll help push you up from down here, so try your best to pull yourself up, all right, Kazuto?”

The tree root could barely support Kazuto by himself much less the combined weight of them both. While Shia worked to push Kazuto upwards, it continued to make the most unnerving tearing sound. She had to hurry. She had to get him up before it gave way...

“Almost there. Almost... *Phew!*”

The moment Kazuto made it to safety—
She heard the sound of everyone’s voices.

“Hey!”

“We know you’re there somewhere! Kazuto! Come on out!”

“Where are you, Kazuto?”

“I’m so sorry! Please forgive me for being such a terrible sister.”

Oh, thank goodness. And Kazuto’s safe, Shia thought, leaning back against the tree root with a sigh of relief.

“I’m right here!” Kazuto shouted loudly.
Everyone flocked to him.



"Are you all right? Don't you dare do something like that again," Kouhei said as he picked up Kazuto and held him tight in his arms.

Relieved to have their brother back, Teppei and Tomoki immediately began to shove Kazuto playfully.

Though she was also relieved at finding Kazuto, Yuu continued to search for Shia.

"Say, isn't Shia with you?"

Kazuto pointed down the cliff side. "She just saved me...but...oh no!"

The tree root that held Shia up broke in half with a loud snap.

"Shia!" Yuu reflexively reached her hand out to Shia. Seeing Yuu lunge forward, the others held on to Yuu. Precious seconds before Shia fell, Yuu managed to grab ahold of her hand.

Breathlessly, both Yuu and Shia stared into one another's faces.

"Yuu..."

"I'm so sorry...for taking everything out on you..."

"Please don't be... I'm just glad everyone's made up with each other." Tears poured down Shia's cheeks. Shia didn't care about her current situation—it wasn't important. She was just so happy to see smiles return

to the faces of the Tamiya Household. Seeing Shia crying, Yuu burst into tears as well.

"All right, you two! Stop weighing yourselves down with all those tears. We're going to pull you up."

On Kouhei's count, Teppei, Tomoki and Kazuto pulled together. Through the combined efforts of the entire Tamiya family, Shia was hoisted to safety.



Two days later, on Saturday morning, Yuu sheepishly came to Shia as she was preparing breakfast.

"Shia, I just wanted to apologize again... for everything...and the apron..."

"Please don't be. If anyone ought to be apologizing, it should be me for hurting your feelings the way I did. As for the apron, I can make another one, and if that gets torn, another. But feelings aren't so easily mended and take much more time to heal, so I'm truly sorry for putting you through so much."

"Oh no, don't say that! Seriously, it wasn't you at all. I've wanted to tell my family how unappreciated I felt for quite some time now... But because I put up such a tough front all the time, it just didn't seem right

that I suddenly show weakness by admitting it...so I never did. Instead, I kept everything all bottled up inside until you came along...and unwittingly became my scapegoat. And for that I'm sorry. I really am."

"Well then, I suppose we could just call it even, then."

After exchanging a series of apologetic bows, the two women finally looked each other in the face and laughed. At that moment a wonderful friendship blossomed between them.

Hearing them conclude their discussion, Kazuto rushed in from behind Yuu. He proudly wore his apple shaped pouch. "Oneechan, there's plenty of time for that girly stuff later. Remember what you were gonna tell her?"

"Oh, that's right. Come on, Shia. We're going for a walk."

"We've got a really cool place to show you."

Yuu and Kazuto both flashed Shia the same, big Tamiya grin.

The two took Shia to a residential area on the opposite end of the shopping district. Although Yuu said they would be taking a walk, Shia did not see any signs of a park or nature trail where they might do that.

In fact, Shia was quite mystified, without the slightest clue why they brought her all the way out here.

"Almost there," Kazuto said, giving Shia's hand a squeeze.

They walked up a street that sloped upward gently. At the top was a wall; a large tree branch reached out and over it, spilling into the street. The branch belonged to a huge tree, and up close, amidst vibrant green leaves, Shia saw it was laden with bright red fruit.

"An...apple tree?"

The apple tree stretched out its branches, as if to welcome Shia, Yuu and Kazuto.

"This is our special place. We used to come up here secretly with our Ma when she was alive."

Yuu gazed at the apple tree sentimentally. "The tree actually belongs to someone, but since this branch is kinda on a public street, we used to just sneak off the apples here."

"Of course, since it wouldn't be fair to the owner, we made a rule to only take enough for the family, and only come once a year... Guess that doesn't change the fact it's still stealing, though, huh? Hehehe."

Both Kazuto and Yuu laughed like mischievous street urchins.

"You said you liked apples, right, Shia? So in celebration of that...and for us making up, we brought you here to pick some apples with us!" Kazuto beamed, tugging Shia towards the apple tree.

"Now, if the people of the house see us, we gotta take off and run before they catch us. So keep a good look out, okay, Shia?" Yuu whispered.

"Just leave it to me! I'm a lot quicker than I look, you know!"

"Ehhh? Well you certainly don't look that way to me."

"Yup, not one bit!"

Hearing the two poke fun at her, Shia puffed her cheeks up and pouted. Then the three of them burst into laughter.



"Alrighty, we've got enough for everyone so let's get out of here!"

Kazuto and Shia nodded in agreement with Yuu's suggestion. Yuu put the apples into a backpack and Kazuto volunteered to carry it. But it was rather heavy for him and he couldn't help but rock back and forth under the weight. Seeing this adorable attempt, both

Shia and Yuu giggled behind him.

"Here you go, Shia." Yuu produced an apple from her pocket and held it out to Shia.

Shia waved the apple away in polite refusal. "I'll wait to eat them with everyone else. As much as I like apples, I can control myself..."

"This one is for all us apple thieves to share together, for all our hard work, silly. Call it a sneak-eat if you will. Go ahead, Shia. You go first."

Yuu extended the apple to Shia again. The apple was bright red and shaped perfectly like a heart.

"It's so perfect I almost feel bad eating it..."

Shia took the apple in her hands.

Crunch.

Sweet and tart together flooded her mouth. A taste so familiar to her. She had to start looking for what she sought again... That which was as familiar as this apple...

With the taste of apple, something suddenly swept through Shia's heart. "I have to go... To find something very dear to me," Shia said as she chewed on the apple, but not to anyone in particular.

She felt the wind pick up around her again. The same liberating wind that blew around her the day she met Kazuto and learned how to swing...



At dinner, when everyone was gathered at the dinner table, Shia made her announcement.

"I was thinking of leaving...tomorrow morning. You've all been so kind to me, and I've had so much fun living here. But I was only supposed to stay as long as it took me to find myself, and I've already stayed much longer than that because I couldn't bear to leave you all... But it's time...and I have to go."

Kouhei, Teppei and Tomoki were completely stunned by her decision. Everyone tried desperately to stop Shia from leaving.

"Now now, there's no need to rush things."

"Yeah, especially since we're all such good friends now... Even Yuu admitted she loves having you around."

"Er, newsflash, but we've already taken care of that little matter woman to woman, okay? So you men can unstick your noses from our business and leave it be. Right, Shia?"

"Yes, but it's not about that at all..."

"Then why...?" Tomoki asked, a curious look on his face.

It was not Shia that answered, but Kazuto. "Shia

is probably looking for someone as important to her as...Ma was to us... And that's why...we can't stop her," Kazuto said. He knew the truth. The face she showed him under the apple tree had been so full of memories. And that faraway look in her eye when she spoke of having to find something... That was the face of a person thinking of someone or something they cared about very much.

But even Shia did not know what she was looking for. She couldn't remember, not yet. But hearing Kazuto's words, she had the feeling he was right about what it was.

"All right, all right, you win," Kouhei said. "But make it tomorrow night instead of tomorrow morning. I've got the day off tomorrow so let's have a big send off party! Shia, you'll at least let an old man throw you a party, won't you?"

"Yes, of course," Shia nodded, delighted.



The next day, Shia decided to clean the house for the very last time.

However, saying they had to prepare for Shia's send-off, the Tamiyas took over the kitchen and liv-

ing room, effectively banning her from those two rooms. So Shia turned her attention to the other rooms instead.

As Shia vacuumed, Kuro watched, sitting behind her with a look of relief on his face. *"So you're finally ready to move on, eh?"*

A little past noon, Shia's and the Tamiya's last get together began. Yuu went all-out on a menu focused on the Western fare she was more confident making. Large platters of tomato stewed chicken, hamburgers, French fries, fried chicken, Italian salad and sliced fruit were laid out on the table in stunning fashion.

Shia ate until she was bursting. And as they ate, they talked about everything: the days they had spent together with Shia, memories of the kids when they were younger. They talked about everything and anything, and never once was there a moment of silence. Everyone laughed and smiled.

But time has a way of going by even quicker while having fun. Before they knew it, night fell over the Tamiya household.

"Well, I should really get going now."

Shia stood up quietly. She looked into everyone's face, one by one, as if to burn their images into her mind... Her heart tightened in her chest.

"You could...you could maybe leave...tomorrow morning instead, couldn't you?" Kazuto tried so hard all day to hold back his tears, but suddenly they flowed uncontrollably down his cheeks.

"I think tonight would be better. That way I might appear in your dreams tonight. I believe the memories you have at night stay with you forever. As they do for me..."

Kouhei took Shia's hand. "Because of you, Shia, I feel like our family's finally come together, like we should have long ago. I think we all knew we were putting up a front, acting like everything was alright since their Ma passed away. But thanks to you, we were able to get everything out in the open and lift that weight of pretending from our shoulders. Thank you." He gave her hand a big, firm shake.

Teppei and Tomoki rubbed their noses and sniffled as they spoke.

"I promise I'll help clean."

"And I'll fold the laundry like a pro, just like you did, Shia."

"If you're ever in the area again, please stop by and see us. I promise I'll be better at stewing by then," Yuu said with a blithe laugh. If she didn't laugh, she felt like she might start crying too.

"Thank you for making my loneliness go away," Kazuto forced out amid a torrent of tears.

"Thank you all so much. I will never forget your kindness. I made these for everyone... They're a little rushed so they didn't come out as nice as I hoped, but please accept them." Shia handed each family member a matching pillowcase; she had sewn them overnight. She also presented Yuu with a brand new apron.

"Shia...thank you...I'll take good care of it..." Finally Yuu, who had been all smiles up until now, couldn't stand it anymore. She started to cry.

"Well then, please always take care of one another." Shia turned towards the entryway, as if to shake off her own tears. Outside, stars glittered brightly.

As Shia bowed her head in one final goodbye, Kazuto raced up to her and placed a small box in her hands. "Shia...we all chipped in and got you something."

"May I open it?"

Kazuto nodded. Shia undid the ribbon, her heart flutter. Inside the box was a beautiful chocolate-colored organdy shawl. It was so delicately airy that Shia thought it might fly away on its own any moment.

"I picked it out. I wanted to get you one just like Ma's," Kazuto admitted sheepishly.

"It's beautiful..." Shia placed the shawl over her shoulders. It was as light as the wind and so very warm. "Thank you so much, everyone. I will treasure this forever. Goodbye. Take care."

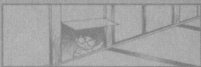
After a large bow, Shia quickly was on her way. She did not turn to look back once. Because if she did, she knew she would cry. She knew she would probably never see them again.

My time here is short.

"Good byyyyye!" Kazuto's voice chased Shia as she walked. When she finally came to a place where Kazuto's voice did not reach, Shia took in a deep breath.

And then, she flew towards the darkness.

Higher...and higher...



STORY 4

How to Defeat Your Rivals



1

“Taaaa! Toooooohhh!!”

Swish swish. Along with his charged cries, the *shinai*¹⁰ cut through the wind.

It was Saturday afternoon, on a day when the sky was higher, the wind a little colder. Voices charged with *kiai*¹¹ echoed through the air, as if trying to rise into the heavens.

“Very nicely done, young master. I believe you have vastly improved upon your skills yet again. Now then, shall we begin our archery lesson? Come come, this way...”

“*Guh.* But...old man, why do we not break instead for a moment? I find myself winded...”

“What’s this? Have you given up already?! How do you expect to become head of the House of Mitarai with such a weak will?”

“*Ku.* I know, I know! I am the eldest son of the illustrious House of Mitarai, Hiroshi Mitarai! Your

words sting with truth! How can a man possibly break when so provoked?! ...My bow, good man. Fetch me my bow!"

On a sprawling plot on the outskirts of the city, built high above everything else stood a complex that was more palace than mansion—the Mitarai House. Here, everyday, a most grueling training session took place.

The boy's hair was a perfect bowl-cut, encircling his head like a crown, the back shaved. His eyes were hidden behind thick glasses. At first sight, one might think of him as a weak, anime loving otaku, but this was the heir of the House of Mitarai, Hiroshi.

Because of his status, Hiroshi was expected to be equally well versed with both books and the blade. Nothing but first place was expected and demanded of him. From a very early age, Hiroshi had been placed under the strict tutelage of his butler and other educators who were at the top of their field, to provide him with advanced instruction on everything from sports to more traditional studies.

"You're so wonderful, Oniisama. I respect you so much for all the hard work you put into everything you do."

Hiroshi's sister, Kaoru, watched her elder brother

from the sidelines whenever he trained. Her trademark tape-measure streamed down her hair like long ribbons. Her hair was cut straight across her forehead like Hiroshi's, but extended to her shoulders in the back. She looked quiet on the outside, but was actually very accomplished with the *naginata*¹².

She watched over Hiroshi with hearts in her eyes; it was obvious she had a serious brother complex.

"Phew. Boy, today's lessons in *kendo* and *kyudo*¹³ were hard." After his two hour martial arts lesson, Hiroshi washed off his sweat in the Mitarai's gorgeous cypress wood bath, before having a spot of tea in his golden teahouse.

Kaoru met him there. "Thank you so much for your hard work today, Oniisama. You must be exhausted. Now, I'm told eating something sweet when you're tired can improve your body's physical recovery. Therefore, I, Kaoru, worked very hard all morning and made some very special red bean cakes, just for you." She disappeared for a moment and came back with some sponge cakes filled with red beans that had the kanji for "Hiroshi" stamped on top.

"You're always so kind to think of my well-being, Kaoru. Thank you..." Hiroshi let out a tired sigh and bit into the red bean cake. "*Mmm*. Yes, delicious.

I wouldn't expect any less from someone who won the 'Nationwide Children's Cooking Contest' and was introduced to the world on TV as a child prodigy. Very good indeed."

But as he spoke, the look on his face was slightly depressed. He nodded with a disgruntled groan and placed his head in his hands.

"It makes me so happy when you enjoy my cooking... Oh my, Oniisama? Is something the matter? You're so pale. Is something troubling you...?"

"Ah, how pathetic of me! What kind of warrior am I to show a face so troubled even a child can read it easily... Forgive me...ku." He bit down on his lip bitterly.

"Oh, Kaoru sees, Oniisama! She gets it now!"

"Y...you do?"

"It's him again, isn't it? The one that tortures you so... But this time, enough is enough! He'll pay for what he's done to you!" Kaoru exclaimed. She jumped to her feet.

"Kaoru, what is it that you get?"

"Takashi Ayanokoji!"

"Noooooooo! Stop it! Don't ever mention that cur's name around me again!" Hiroshi yelled, and pulled himself into a ball. He clutched his hands to his ears

as he shook his head violently from side to side.

Yesterday, Hiroshi had suffered yet another crushing defeat at the hands of Takashi Ayanokoji. This time it happened when Hiroshi received the results and rankings sheet for the nationwide middle school examination. The name that shone so brilliantly in the coveted first place spot was not his, but that of "Takashi Ayanokoji."

I was second. I was so confident going into that test, too. Yet somehow, this Takashi Ayanokoji comes in first... Why? Why can't I surpass him? If I take fifth, he takes fourth. When I take seventh, he takes sixth. He's always one tiny step above me. What sort of fellow is he? Takashi Ayanokoji?!

Lately, Hiroshi's head had been constantly bogged down with thoughts like these.

"Kaoru shall not accept the heir to the House of Mitarai as one who sits around and sulks alone in defeat. You must be more forward thinking! Forward, always forward! That is our family motto!" Kaoru threw the words at her older brother.

"Yes! That's right! What have I done? I know full well self-doubt and hesitation can work adversely against one's studies, and yet I allowed them to affect me... Forgive me, Kaoru! I shall go and purify my

soul at once!"

With that, Hiroshi darted from the teahouse and headed toward the mountain that loomed behind the family estate.

"Young master, you must not forget this," his old butler called to him. He reverently handed Hiroshi an ornate bundle detailed with gaudy but beautiful gold stitching.

"Thanks! I'm off!"

The place Hiroshi was headed was sacred to many generations of Mitarai men. Whenever their Earthly desires and anxieties got the best of them, this is where they came to cleanse themselves. To this waterfall.

The waterfall roared loudly and spit out sprays of chillingly cold water. Against the backdrop of a peaceful mountain, the sight of an untamed, raging waterfall had a dazzling effect. Here the early autumn winds seemed colder than ever.

"Hmm, just gazing upon this waterfall, I can already feel my soul strengthening and pulling itself together."

Hiroshi immediately took some traditional white clothing from the bundle his butler gave him, and put it on.

“Haaahhh!!” After letting out a loud *kiai* to fill himself with resolve, Hiroshi slowly walked to the waterfall’s basin.

“*Guwah!* So cold...” He quickly withdrew the toe he used to test the water’s temperature.

“Ku, how can I possibly become the head of the House of Mitarai if I’m unnerved by something so mundane! Toryyaaaatoto...but...it’s...so very cold!”

Despite his yelps, Hiroshi eventually made it to the base of the waterfall and plunged into its raging waters. Because of the sheer force of the water, Hiroshi could barely sit still. His entire body trembled and his teeth chattered from the cold.

“IIIIIII...cannotttt...alllllow things...to go on this wayyyyy. I mustttttt...do somethingggg...about AAAAAAyanokoji...I musttttt...ahhh, it’s so cold-ddddddd...”

Though it seemed like he might succumb to the pressure of the waterfall at any second, Hiroshi endured the trial, all the while concocting a master plan to defeat the loathsome Takashi Ayanokoji.

But what could he do...? He did not even know what Takashi Ayanokoji looked like. How could he come up with a fail-proof strategy without even that? Then it hit him.

Yes, of course. I must meet with him. That's exactly what I must do.

An ancestor's words echoed in his mind.

"Know your enemy and know yourself, and one hundred victories shall be yours."

Victory belongs to he who makes the first move. Yes! This has to work!

Hiroshi jumped out of the waterfall the instant the plan dawned on him.

So cold...but for Japanese men, nothing beats a waterfall, I think. Waterfalls surely have some mystical force that awakens those latent abilities, which often remain dormant, hidden deep within a person's soul. Wah ha ha! Maybe it wasn't the waterfall at all. Maybe it was me, because I'm such an ultra genius.

"Wah ha ha ha ha ha!"

Kaoru watched intently from behind a tree as Hiroshi laughed whole-heartedly. "Oh, Oniisama, how brilliant you are. No ordinary man could possibly resolve their hardship merely through physical training and here you stand, triumphant. That is why you are Kaoru's one and only ideal," she whispered to herself, eyes shining with tears of respect.



After returning home, soaked to the bone, Hiroshi called for his butler.

"How may I serve you, young master?" the old man asked and handed Hiroshi a bath towel and hot cup of tea to warm him.

"I shall be withdrawing from my current school!"

Kaoru was so surprised she couldn't help but jump from the shadow of the tree she had been hiding behind and confront her dear brother. "Wh...what?! What do you mean? Oniisama?!"

"Hiroshi, what is the meaning of this? Each year your school competes for first or second in the nation. It boasts a long and prestigious history, and yet you say you wish to withdraw from it?!" As the old butler handed his young master a change of clothes, worry and incomprehension flickered across his face.

"I have decided I must completely obliterate and crush the one who stands between me and the top! The one named 'Takashi Ayanokoji.' That is why I must transfer to his school. It is imperative I learn everything I can about him." With each word he spoke, his delusions grew grander and grander.

Yes, it is all coming together now. It is all part of Ayanokoji's scheme. Ayanokoji must have noticed my

presence too, and that's why he decided to get such good grades, in order to throw me off track. Fufufufufu! Yes, I fully understand now. So, he was that scared of me breathing down his neck, was he? Ahahaha, what a small, small man he is!

It was Mitarai family tradition to put a spin on things that best suited their own goals and convenience.

"You know the saying, 'Nothing ventured, nothing gained'? Well, let this be my venture. If Ayanokoji wants a fight, I'll take the fight right to him!"

Kaoru clasped her hands together in front of her chest and gazing longingly at Hiroshi. "Oh my, what a wonderful idea, Oniisama. Yes, deal a full body blow! That is the warrior spirit for sure! And Kaoru shall follow her dear Oniisama to the ends of the Earth!" She swooned.

"Ah ha ha ha ha ha!!! Prepare yourself, vile Ayanokoji! For I come to punish thee! Wash your neck so it's easier to strike!" Hiroshi shouted, posing like one of the fierce Deva guardian kings¹⁴.

But though he remembered to change his top, he forgot to do the same to his bottoms. In the wind, his loincloth flitted gracefully, like a flag.

Hiroshi decided it was vital he complete a hard-

core physical transformation before he did anything else.

"Before I meet my enemy, I must push myself to the limit and heighten both my physical and intellectual abilities. In order to improve my intelligence, I must gain the stamina and endurance it takes to tackle the hardest and most grueling of studies. And in order to gain stamina, I must train my body..."

Praising himself for his own ingenuity and foresight, Hiroshi began his training.



Kaoru took Hiroshi to the mountains behind their grand estate. "You said you need a full physical transformation, so Kaoru has prepared something very special to assist you. Behold, House of Mitarai's very own athletic facility, polished and refined to perfection, and put together overnight by your loving sister, the Mitarai Sarutobi¹⁵! If you can clear this course without a scratch, then Ayanokoji will be but a flea to you when you meet at last!"

"Ohhh, this is truly the most perfect training system I have ever seen. Good work, Kaoru!"

Kaoru laughed shrilly. "Oooh ho ho ho! You honor

me so with your flattery, Oniisama.”

Hiroshi changed into his new training gear—a black ninja suit. “Looks are everything, and dare I say it, I sure look good in everything, don’t I?” Hiroshi proclaimed, a large, contented grin on his face.

“Now! Let us begin!”

And with that, he faced the large training facility Karou had carefully constructed using the natural landscape of the mountains and rivers. The facility stretched on, as decadent—or as over the top—as only the Mitarai Household could make possible.

Karou said proudly, “The most important thing for a man is his upper body strength. Therefore, your first challenge will be the Tarzan Jump!”

A number of ropes had been suspended from the trees around Hiroshi, each with a gymnastic ring at the end. Each rope was spaced so that one could catch hold of an adjacent ring using the momentum of a swing. Using the swing and one’s upper body strength, a person could cross from one rope to the next. However, because the ropes were placed so high off the ground, if one missed a ring, they would plummet to the earth.

“Ready? Set... GO!!”

“Alrighty then! Here I go!”

Hiroshi grabbed the first rope with his right hand. Swinging his legs to create momentum, he rocked back and forth. With perfect timing, he grabbed the next rope with his left hand.

"*Phew*. That's one down. And plenty more to go."

Hiroshi was much more agile than he looked and, with a rhythmical cry of "eiya, eiya," he swung from tree to tree. Rather than being Tarzan incarnate...he looked more like Tarzan's pet chimpanzee!

"Uhoho!" After a while, he even began to sound like a chimpanzee. Without any problems, Hiroshi used fifty rings to make his way to the goal.

"*Fu fu fu*. That was easy peasy! I could have done that with my eyes closed, Kaoru!"

"But of course! Now then, let us move on to your lower body. You must cross over that river using a series of jumps. We call it the 'River Dance!'"

"A dance? Why would you call a simple river-crossing a dance?"

"You'll find out for yourself very soon. Now, off you go. Toodles!"

On the bank of a river that was about five meters wide, lay a single, long pole.

"I see, I see. So I'm to pole vault to the other side

am I? *Fa*, all too simple...all I need to do is calculate the width of the river and...if I place the tip of the pole around the middle of river and propel myself, I should be able to land on the other side quite easily. A common man might simply jump without properly ascertaining the situation, but I am no simple man. *Ahh*...sometimes I cannot help but be awed by own intelligence.”

Hiroshi shouldered the three-meter long pole and began to run towards the river.

“Gooooooooooooo!!”

KICK. His footing was solid. Yes, it was a perfect launch! The pole struck the riverbed precisely where wanted it to.

But then! *Zubobobobobo*. The pole began to sink.

“Wh...what’s this? Quicksand?!”

Hiroshi held on to the pole for dear life. It stood straight up in the center of the river, but continued to sink every second he hung on. Hiroshi had to climb higher and higher up to avoid falling into the river.

“Drat...so I’ll have to scrap my jump theory and swim to the other shore instead, eh?”

Just as the thought crossed his mind, something resembling a floating green rock caught his eye. Sur-

veying the river, Hiroshi noticed there were actually a few dozen green rocks that seemed to float and sink, sink and float languidly. A large eye opened on the closest one.

"It can't be...can it? Are those really...alligators? *Unnnunnuu!* Which means I can make a suicide swim or...find another way..."

Clinging to the pole, Hiroshi began to think.

"*Fufun.* If you think you can break the great Hiroshi Mitarai, you're sorely mistaken! I see the solution to this puzzle as clear as day. The reason for putting alligators into the river is elementary! So here I go! It's all or nothing!"

Hiroshi leaned back and eased the pole down to an angle. Using his weight, he curled the tip of the pole back. Boing! With the curve of the pole, he launched himself into the air and landed on the back of the closest alligator.

"Ugagagagah—!"

Feeling a sudden weight on its back, the alligator snapped its large mouth open with surprise. It whipped its tail in agitation. *Splash!* Hiroshi knew how much force an alligator packed in its tail. There was no doubt in his mind that one hit would be enough to knock him unconscious.

“Eeyy!”

Before the alligator really got angry, he leapt to the back of another one.

Poon, poon, poon. He gracefully danced from one alligator to the next. This was a true river dance. Kaoru’s name for it had been spot on.

After about ten minutes, Hiroshi somehow made it safely across to the opposite bank.

“*Huff huff huff...* That...that was pretty...hard-core.” He breathed heavily, his shoulders rising up and down with his chest.

Kaoru greeted him, all smiles, with polite applause. Hiroshi’s eyes bored into her with a glare.

“And just what was your contingency plan once I got eaten by an alligator, eh? Kaoru?”

“Kaoru had the utmost faith in your ability to successfully complete this trial, Oniisama... And had it come down to it, Kaoru was prepared to destroy each and every one of those alligators with her naginata...just like this...*cheesuto!!*”

Kaoru launched into a masterful demonstration with her naginata.

“Wait, Kaoru! Careful...!” Avoiding the tip of her blade with practiced steps, Hiroshi dabbed at the sweat that had collected on his brow.

"Now, moving along!" Kaoru exclaimed, pointing her naginata behind Hiroshi.

Hiroshi followed the point of the blade with his eyes and saw a large ball, bigger than him, used during school sporting events.

"What is that?" Hiroshi snapped.

"It's exactly what it is. You must ride that ball down the mountainside in order to train your sense of balance."

"Very well! I'll clear this one just as I did the others!"

Unphased by his previous trials, Hiroshi hopped on the ball like a seasoned circus performer.

"I played a lot of *kemari*¹⁶ when I was younger, so I'm quite adept at ball activities! There's no challenge in this task at all...whoa whoa... WaaahHHH-HhhHh?!!"

As well-balanced as Hiroshi was on level ground, he forgot he was on a steep mountain slope. While he was busy horsing around, posing atop the ball, the ball picked up quite a bit of speed, and was now hurtling down the mountainside.

"Oh, Oniisama! It's best to keep your feet moving or you'll fall off."

"I know that...! UwaaHhhHH!"

Hiroshi moved his feet feverishly in hopes of staying on top of the ball. But that had a downside; he found himself assaulted by tree limbs, branches and leaves all the way down.

“Ow. Owwww!!”

A man’s face was his life but if this kept up, his gorgeous visage might end up scarred for life. He lowered his posture, still on top of the ball, to avoid the overgrowth. That made the ball speed up.

“Heeehhh! I’m gonna fall!” he screamed.

A large net loomed ahead of him. He was going to crash right into it!

BAM.

THUD.

Face first, Hiroshi plowed into the net, tumbled and landed on his back.

Clap clap clap... Kaoru applauded again as she stood in front of Hiroshi, a big smile on her face.

“Congratulations! You made it to the finish line, Oniisama.”

“You just had to choose the most reckless, most dangerous way of stopping me, didn’t you?!”

“Well, it was rolling so fast. This was the only way Kaoru could come up with to stop you. Please forgive your dear little sister... Oh my, Oniisama, your face.

Oh ho ho ho ho~! It's looks just like a *shogi*¹⁷ board."

The net left a deep impression upon Hiroshi's face.

"Blast it! All this pain...I must endure it so I can defeat my wretched adversary, Takashi Ayanokoji. Perseverance...I must persevere," he told himself. Deep down, however, his heart was blue.

"Now then, shall we proceed to the final trial?" Kaoru produced a whistle and blew on it. *PYuuUUU!*

Flap flap flap flap flap... The flapping sound of large wings. With a rustle of feathers, a large falcon landed on Kaoru's shoulder.

"Jimmy? But that's my pet, Jimmy. What are you doing with him?" Hiroshi asked, doing his best to conceal the anxiety in his voice.

"Our next trial is a timed challenge, pitting you against Jimmy for half an hour. Should you survive—ur, keep out of Jimmy's clutches for the full thirty minute period, then you win."

"*Whaaaaatt?! Are you serious? You know full well how ferocious falcons are, so why?!*"

"For precisely that reason. Kaoru believes this to be the best way to train your agility. Now, know that Kaoru does not wish to see her dearest Oniisama suffer, but she is also devoted to providing the best

training for him, as he deserves and demands. You may call Kaoru an evil, wicked, super-villain but our heart, albeit a demon's stone heart at the moment, is in the right place. No matter how you cry, we shall continue this training session and see it to its proper conclusion. Now, put this on your head. It's Jimmy's favorite—rabbit meat.”

Kaoru secured the meat to Hiroshi's head. “In three minutes time, we shall sic Jimmy upon you. So please take full advantage of your head start and run away...starting, NOW!”

Before Hiroshi could protest, Kaoru started her stopwatch. “You're losing precious time just standing there. Go along now...”

Jimmy opened his large beak and directed a piercing threat at Hiroshi. “Kaaah!”

“Why you ungrateful avian! Is this how you treat your owner? Don't you remember who I am? Or are you angry with me just because I forgot to feed you a few times? *Fine!* If that's how you want to be, I'll play your game!!”

Once more, Hiroshi dove into the forested mountains. He was looking for an area heavily blanketed with foliage that he could use to hide from Jimmy's keen eyes. Instead of tackling the trial head on, Hiroshi

opted for a less confrontational path; to wait things out patiently while Jimmy did all the work.

"*Fufufu*... Jimmy doesn't have the slightest chance of finding me here. One doesn't win battles by running around like a chicken with his head cut off. No, one must read the situation and formulate a careful plan. Ahh, it's almost a sin to be so composed. Ah ha ha ha!"

His pleased laughter echoed through a nearby cave, where he decided to hide from Jimmy.

"...What a damp place this is."

"SSSSss. Ssssss."

He heard the sound of something scraping against the ground.

"How loud."

Something cool brushed against the back of Hiroshi's neck.

What the? Water...?

Thinking it was just water, Hiroshi touched his neck to wipe it off and...squish. Something slimy.

"For the love of...what on Earth is it?!" Hiroshi turned around; in front of him was a...!

"S...snakeeeee!!!"

It was a mammoth snake, the thickness of his thigh. The snake moved its head to stare at Hiroshi intently.

"Wh...what's a snake doing here?!"

As he yelled out the question, he heard the whirling *fut fut fut fut fut* sound of a helicopter overhead. The voice projected over a microphone explained...

"Kaoru knows her Oniisama very well. She foresaw he might do something like this, and that's why she planted a great serpent in the bushes. Let's see if you can run from it and Jimmy at the same time! Oh ho ho ho ho ho!"

Darn that sister of mine! he thought with equal parts disgust and admiration. She was good.

As the thought crossed his mind, the serpent slowly closed the distance between itself and Hiroshi.

Calm down. Eyes can speak louder than words. So long as I keep my gaze stronger than the snake's, it won't dare lunge at me. As he stared down the snake, he also inched backward, all the way to the mouth of the cave.

"SSssss. Sssssss..." Flicking its bright red tongue, the snake patiently bided its time, waiting for Hiroshi to let his guard down for just an instant.

"Eeeyy!"

Hiroshi kicked a small rock on the ground. The snake's gaze wavered, distracted by the rock.

"Now's my chance!"

In the split second the snake looked away, Hiroshi ran out of the cave as fast as his feet would carry him. He hoped the snake would eventually lose interest in pursuing him if he got far enough away. He headed up the mountain path.

"Phew. I know it's all part of the training but the way things are going, I need more lives than I have."

If there was one thing Hiroshi didn't like, it was snakes. They were just so creepy. Just thinking of that big snake sent shivers up and down his spine. But the snake forced him to act rashly and, before he noticed, he ran into a clearing.

Whooshh. Whooshh. An immense gust of wind swept up and around him. Only a hair's breadth from his head, Jimmy the falcon flew by. Falcons were incredibly fast; it was believed the speed at which a falcon descended upon its prey rivaled that of a roller coaster.

"Wah, I've been spotted! Let's see... I should have about ten minutes left on the clock? I've got to keep running!" Hiroshi began to run again.

Whoossh. Vyyuunn. With his wings spread wide, Jimmy passed over the fleeing Hiroshi again and again.

"Have you been listening to anything?! I said I'm

your owner, *me!* Not anyone else!”

But even after being yelled at, Jimmy didn't let up. So long as the rabbit meat remained on Hiroshi's head, the bird wasn't about to quit.

“Oh no, I went the wrong way!”

Hiroshi ran straight onto the edge of a cliff. The area was completely clear except for one large tree off to the side, strangled by vines. From the air, he was in plain sight.

“There's not even anywhere to hide around here. And I've only got two more minutes to go!”

Overhead, Jimmy circled slowly. Knowing he had his prey cornered, the bird polished his plan of attack. *Whoosh*. Jimmy dove, wings cutting through the wind.

“Oh no!”

But wait! I know! Hiroshi instinctively reached for one of the vines wrapped around the tree and held onto it as tight as he could.

Shaaahhh! As Jimmy bore down on his head, Hiroshi jumped off the cliff.

Pooooon. The rabbit meat that had been tied to Hiroshi's head popped off, jarred by the jump, and fell forward, farther down the cliff.

VyyuuNNnNNN. Jimmy immediately switched tar-

gets and dove for the meat instead, just a hair's breadth between Hiroshi and Jimmy's unforgiving talons.

"Oh man, that was close. But take that! I made it! My superhuman reflexes won the day. Wa ha ha ha ha!"

Once he was sure Jimmy wasn't coming back, Hiroshi used the vine to pull himself back to the top of the cliff. Even as he caught his breath, visions of his victory over Jimmy clouded his head. He heard Kaoru's voice from behind.

"All right! Time's up! You did it, Oniisama. Good job. Your ability to assess the situation at hand and problem-solve was amazing."

Hiroshi turned and saw Kaoru, beaming.

Smack. Kaoru tapped Hiroshi on the shoulder to congratulate him.

"Whoa, don't do that here...AAAhHH!"

Kaoru's one strike sent Hiroshi falling backward, almost all the way over the cliff. He felt as if...as if for just a second, his body floated.

"Oniisama...fight!" Kaoru shouted. She extended her hand to Hiroshi as he teetered on the ledge.

Reaching out desperately for his sister's hand, Hiroshi yelled back. "Let's do it!"¹⁸

Just one step before both he and Kaoru were about

to fall off the cliff, the sibling's hands joined together.

"Oniisama."

"Kaoru..."

Kaoru pulled him up. The two gazed deeply at one another, tears glistening in their eyes. They were in their own little world—one which no one else could enter.

"You did it. You've successfully transformed your body and powered yourself up. There's no way you'll ever lose to a wimpy failure like Takashi Ayanokoji again."

"Thanks for everything, Kaoru. I'm much more confident now, because of you. There's just one thing I must ask of you..."

"And what is that?"

"Would you apologize for me? You know, to Jimmy? About not feeding him as of late?" And with those words, Hiroshi collapsed onto the ground.

Kaoru simply smiled. "Of course, Oniisama. But if this is all it takes to tire you out, you have much, much more to learn! ♥"



"We cannot call ourselves the masters of war

without gathering all the intelligence on our enemy that we can."

Although Hiroshi had successfully transformed his body and was still planning on transferring schools, doubt still lingered in the corner of his mind. After careful thought, he decided to conduct a thorough background check on Takashi Ayanokoji.

"Please, allow me to accompany you, Oniisama."

He promptly denied Kaoru's request. "Ayanokoji could be a most lecherous beast, one that lays his hands on a girl as soon as he lays eyes upon her. I cannot in good conscience allow a female member of the House of Mitarai to go near such a dangerous foe. You've done more than enough, Kaoru. I shall take care of the rest of this matter myself."

"Oh, Oniisama, you're so kind to think of Kaoru's well-being. Very well, Kaoru shall remain home and pray for your victory."

Kaoru was still not convinced her brother would be safe on his own. So she offered the services of her two personal "shadows" to Hiroshi. Both cut imposing figures in ninja gear, the man dressed in black, the woman in red. They were both in their twenties, and were incredibly light and quick on their feet; with their

quick reflexes and agility they could easily have been stunt performers.

"I call the black one Azuki, and the red one Ichigo¹⁹."

"Thanks once again, Kaoru. For your forethought."

Kaoru nodded and smiled.

2

The very next day, the second phase of Hiroshi's plan to exterminate Takashi Ayanokoji—aptly named the “Check Everything from A to Z Scheme”—began.

“It's simply not possible that someone without my world-renowned tutors could do better than me at studies, not in the slightest, without some sort of outside help... He must employ a special study technique...or perhaps he's attending an advanced training facility of some sort. What is it, Azuki? What is it you wish to say? Don't be shy now. You may speak freely.”

Hearing Hiroshi's concerns, Azuki opened his mouth in suggestion. “Well, Hiroshi, I believe our best course of action, to bring about the quickest results, would be to mark and trail Ayanokoji throughout his day.”

“Yes, you're right. I was actually thinking the same thing myself. Very well, let us be off!”

“Hiroshi, this...” Ichigo said, and handed Hiroshi

a single sheet of paper. "...is Ayanokoji's address."

Having finished all the necessary paperwork to transfer schools, Hiroshi had been granted an entire week off to prepare for the adjustment. Up since the crack of dawn on his first day off, Hiroshi headed towards his rival's—Takashi Ayanokoji's—residence.

Hiroshi looked curiously at his surroundings. "What is this? Such small houses. What is going on here? What is this place?" he asked of Azuki.

"This is a multi-unit apartment complex, Hiroshi. The peasant families have but three rooms each in which to reside, packed together like veal."

"Three rooms? We have more bathrooms than that!"

This was the first time Hiroshi had ever visited such a common area. Everything was new to him, and everything piqued his interest.

"What is that over there?"

"That is a convenience store, master," Ichigo responded knowingly.

"I see. So that is the rumored 24-hour general merchant, is it...? It looks quite modern, does it not?"

"It carries all of life's necessities within, Hiroshi. Its comprehensive line of cup o' noodles and instant ramen is especially impressive."

"Cup o'noodles, you say? I've always wanted to try such at least once in my life. Yes, let us try them now."

Ichigo asked the store attendant for hot water and brought some cup o'noodles to Hiroshi.

"Hrmm... This is not bad at all. And it's so simple to make..."

Munch munch munch... Hiroshi finished his instant noodles as quickly as they were made.

Hiroshi wondered about everything on display at the convenience store. From cheap cosmetics, popular among high school girls, to the snacks and candies in all the aisles, there was nothing that didn't impress Hiroshi. Back home, his diet was strictly limited to the most natural and organic foods, while his necessities were always top brand, no matter what part of the world they had to be imported from. There was so much he had never seen, much less imagined.

"Hrrmmm. I see. As you said, this is quite impressive indeed. The life of a peasant does have its saving graces."

Nodding to himself, Hiroshi produced a memo pad from his breast pocket. Written on the cover of the pad were the words, "Ye Olde Notebook of Hiroshi." Flipping the notebook open, he gently wrote upon a

blank page:

The convenience store is the peasants' place of relaxation and refreshment.

He smiled contentedly. "Write down that which catches your attention immediately! Such is the teaching of our Mitarai ancestors."

"You approve of this place, Hiroshi? In that case, we shall ensure the removal of any pests that might disturb you during your stay. Please take your time and observe everything to your heart's content."

With that, Ichigo began to forcibly escort the other customers in the convenience store out the door.

"What are you doing?" the store attendant said, disbelieving.

Azuki immediately jumped to action with a thunderous "How dare you, peasant?" He took a fighting stance.

Terrified of Azuki's forceful words and nature, the attendant jumped under the front counter and hid.

After clearing all the pests from the store, Azuki and Ichigo stood before the entrance like two ferocious Deva guardians. This kept away most of the store's potential customers but not all. A skilled judo throw

awaited those who still tried to wedge between the two shadows for a bit of shopping.

Back inside, Hiroshi enjoyed himself as the store's one and only customer. He busily admired the paper used to sop up oil from tempura and fried chicken.

As Hiroshi shopped, a number of people from the neighborhood, on their way to work or school, gathered around the convenience store, wondering what was going on.

"Why can't we get into the convenience store?"

"These weird people won't let us through."

More gathered every minute—a safe distance from the two enforcers out front, of course.

"Awright, I'm off! Oh man, I can't be late again," Takashi Ayanokoji exclaimed. He glanced at his watch and darted from his house.

On the way to the train station, he noticed a large gathering of people. Even though he was in a hurry, he couldn't help but be curious.

"Did something happen here?" he asked an old woman standing close by. She was trying her best to peek between the rows of people to get a better look at the scene.

"Well, seems like there are some strange people

in front of the convenience store causing quite a ruckus.”

“Really? That’s kinda cool.” Takashi jumped up and down to try and get a better look over the sea of people, but there was a very tall person in the front that he couldn’t quite see around. Still, he managed to get a glimpse of one black and one red clad ninja standing guard in front of the store and the back of the head of a boy sporting a bowl cut through the window.

“Crap, I can’t see. But if they’re dressed up like ninja...maybe they’re shooting a TV show or something... Oh crap, I’m gonna miss the train.”

Though the incident at the convenience store tugged at him to stay, Takashi began to run full speed towards the train station. As he ran, the wails of police sirens rang through the street.

Finally noticing the assembled mass of bystanders, Hiroshi puffed his chest out like a peacock. “What’s this? Would you look at all the peasants gathered out there? They must all want to get a peek at me. Ahh, it’s rough to be the heir of the House of Mitarai, I tell you. I can’t help but stand out.”

Suddenly, Azuki rushed into the store with a pan-

icked look. He fell to one knee before Hiroshi.

"The enemy...he was just in this area," he whispered in Hiroshi's ear.

"Wh-what?!" Hiroshi screamed. He ran out of the convenience store, but his view was blocked by the crowd.

"You lost sight of him?!"

"Yes, forgive me, Hiroshi. Let us be away after him."

Once Ichigo successfully repelled the crowd, the three ran towards the train station. But several police cars, sirens howling, screeched to a stop in front of them, blocking their progress.

Hiroshi stopped in his tracks. "What is the meaning of this?"

One of the officers got out of his squad car. "All right, you lot. You're the ones that caused the disturbance at the convenience store, aren't you? I got a report about you. Care to explain exactly what you were doing there?" he asked courteously.

"We were simply shopping," Azuki said.

Unfortunately, the explanation didn't seem to be what the officers were looking for. They stared at Azuki, Ichigo and Hiroshi as if each had grown another head.

"You dare to look down at me, peasant?! Do you know who I am? I'm heir to the House of Mita—"

Hiroshi didn't have enough time to finish his sentence; six rather large officers emerged from the police cars and surrounded the out-of-place threesome.

"The convenience store doesn't just belong to you, you know. So we'll need you to come with us."

"W...what? Why?!" Hiroshi's cry echoed pitifully through the multi-apartment residential area.



"Man oh man, what an exquisite waste of time that was. Darn these peasants. What could they possibly be thinking? Holding us like we were some common criminals."

Hiroshi and his two guardians poured out of the police station, shoulders slumped, defeated. Despite their excuses, they had been brought down to the station, where they were questioned for hours on end.

"Grrrrrrrr! How humiliating...!" Hiroshi bitterly spat out. "Ugh, how did this happen? And why? Why on Earth...? Ah!"

The thought crossed his mind that he should look forward instead of dwelling on his setbacks, and he

quickly regained his composure. He had more important things to take care of.

That's right! He still had to conduct a reconnaissance mission on Ayanokoji!

"Look at the time. He must be heading home by now. Hurry, let us not tarry a moment further!"

Hiroshi and his two bodyguards hastened to Takashi's school.



Ding dong, ding dong. ♪

The final bell of the day sounded, just as a winded Hiroshi and company arrived in front of Takashi's school.

"Ichigo, show that to me again."

"Yes, sir!" Ichigo offered Hiroshi a picture of Takashi. It was an action shot Takashi running, his hair dancing behind him on a cool breeze. Ichigo had taken it when Takashi was on his way to school one day.

"Hmmp. Look at his hair! He's grown it so long. What an unbecoming and inexcusable action for a Japanese male! Pah, he's more like a girl if you ask me," Hiroshi said, voice dripping with venom. "Don't let him slip out of your sights again!" he demanded.

"Yes sir," Ichigo said with a bow of her head.

With Takashi's picture in his hand, Hiroshi and the two ninja patiently waited in the shadow of the school gates.

A few minutes later, a girl came up behind Hiroshi and stopped.

"Oh my gosh, are you serious? How hot! That's a picture of Takashi, isn't it," the girl squealed and grabbed the picture out of Hiroshi's hands.

"Woman! What is the meaning of this?!" Hiroshi tried to grab the picture back, but it was too late. A gaggle of giggling school girls on their way home, hearing the name "Takashi," descended on the three like locusts.

"What's going on?"

"Ohmigosh, it's a close up of him!"

"It's such a natural shot too. He's *sooo* dreamy."

"Do you guys have other ones too?"

"I'll buy them off you for 300 Yen a pic, okay?"

The picture passed quickly from the hands of one girl to the next.

"Hey, I told you...don't touch that picture. Women!" Before he knew it, Hiroshi was at the center of a ring of girls; they were packed around him and he was carelessly shoved left and right as they all vied to get

a better look at the picture. Azuki and Ichigo simply watched, overwhelmed by the surge of school girls, at a loss on how to handle the situation.

"Hmm? There's a big crowd of people over there," Kotarou murmured as gazed at the school gates. He and his friends had just gotten out of class and were about to head home.

"You're right. And it's all girls. I bet they're that fan club of yours, waiting to walk home with you again, Ten-chan," Koboshi said, with a jeering smirk at Takashi.

"Yeah right," Takashi said nonchalantly, an indifferent look on his face.

"Ooh, there he is again! Mr. Cool, himself! I wish I could tell them what the real Ten-chan was like. How he does a lot of stupid things too."

"Hey, be quiet, you...!" Takashi playfully rammed his body into Koboshi's.

Koboshi ran. "Kyaahh! Stop it! Stop it, Ten-chan!"

Takashi grinned—"Never!"—and chased Koboshi down.

"Sheesh, don't you guys ever get tired of playing tag like that every single day?" Kotarou asked with a bored sigh.

"Oh, who's Mr. Cool now?" Takashi teased.

No longer running after Koboshi, Takashi glanced behind Kotarou. The flash of black and red ninja suits caught his eye.

"Hmm? Those outfits...I could have sworn I saw them earlier...near my house."

Koboshi stopped running too, and walked over beside Takshi. "Hmm? Do you know those people over there?"

"No, but...they kinda look like the people that caused a big commotion in my neighborhood this morning."

"Really? How strange they are. I mean, those are ninja outfits, right?" Koboshi said. "I wonder what sort of twisted grown ups would walk around during the middle of the day wearing something like that." She shrugged. "Weirdos!"

"Well, whatever their reason, I think it's best we don't get involved with them," Takashi said and turned toward the train station.

The girls that surrounded Hiroshi suddenly dispersed like baby spiders and quietly walked toward Takashi, following him in a very feminine way ...

Hiroshi continued to holler. "I said, enough, damn women!"

While captured in the web of school girls, Hiroshi defended himself by flailing his arms around and around. With them so suddenly gone, he spun. Without friction and dizzyed, he quite unceremoniously fell down and scraped his knee.

"Owww!" Hiroshi cried with a scowl.

With all the girls following Takashi, Hiroshi was left all alone, looking particularly pathetic and sad.

"I wonder if he's okay...that boy over there," Kotarou mumbled as he glanced at the boy sitting on his bottom with nothing to show but a well-groomed bowl cut.

Koboshi shook her head and motioned for Kotarou to hurry along. "We mustn't concern ourselves with weirdos, Kotarou!"

Oh well, I suppose it's really none of my business. He laughed quietly to himself before running after Takashi and Koboshi. The three of them set off for the train station.

Five minutes later, Azuki and Ichigo came to the lonesome Hiroshi's rescue. The three moved to an empty park.

"We're so glad you're safe, Hiroshi."

Hiroshi paid no attention to his guards. "*Grr*, how could one such as he merit the attention of all those

girls? It's such a mystery to me."

"Then we shall go out and investigate the reason for his popularity, sir. Please wait for us here, Hiroshi."

Azuki and Ichigo immediately darted away in a flash of black and red.

Ahh, that was so tiring...although it did feel quite nice to be surrounded by girls like that, Hiroshi thought with a dreamy, loose smile on his face.

Ever since he was little, Hiroshi received his advanced education from private tutors who taught him one on one. Everyone around him was an adult who had been hired to teach him manners, martial arts and general education. He never had the opportunity to speak to children, much less girls, of his own age. In fact, the only girl he knew was his own sister, Kaoru. So, to the pure Hiroshi, the events of the day had been quite stimulating to say the least.

Alrighty then! I'll learn to be more popular than he is! Then, not only will I destroy him at studies but with the ladies as well! Hahahahah! That's right! I shall challenge and defeat him with looks next... Oh yes, beware, Ayanokoji, for another ingenious idea has just popped into my extraordinary mind. Man, I can't help but amaze myself sometimes.

As he sat by himself, laughing, self-satisfaction and self-admiration oozing from his pores, Azuki and Ichigo returned to his smirking side.

"Hiroshi, we have determined the cause of Ayanokoji's popularity," Azuki announced with confidence.

"We distributed questionnaires regarding Ayanokoji to those who declared themselves Ayanokoji fans. These are the results."

Ichigo reverently extended a large handful of sheets to Hiroshi.

- **What about Takashi Ayanokoji do you like?**
- **What about Takashi Ayanokoji, other than his face, do you think is dreamy?**
- **What does Takashi Ayanokoji do to make your heart flutter?**
- **What sort of clothing would best suit Takashi Ayanokoji?**

"Aha! Now, this is good. These questions are all on point. Let me see..."

Hiroshi crouched and began to feverishly read each and every questionnaire. After thirty minutes,

having read thirty sheets, he stood up, a determined look on his face.

"We must immediately find our way to Shibuya! I must transform into a groovy *dandy*!"

And so, Hiroshi and company headed towards Shibuya. It was his first time there. Armed with a guidebook and a dozen fashion magazines he purchased at the bookstore by the train station, Hiroshi felt invincible.

"According to the questionnaires, the women folk seem to like the clothing found here the most."

Using the results of the questionnaires as a reference, Hiroshi decided to build up his new wardrobe in Shibuya. Considered the holy land of high school girls, even in the middle of the day the streets of Shibuya were packed with youths.

"Ugh, what's with this crowd?! I can barely walk straight with all these people pushing me."

Hiroshi had never been in a shopping district like this before, and so he couldn't help but to stare and gawk at the sights that unfolded around him. Not to mention Azuki and Ichigo wore ninja outfits, so they stood out, catching the eye of locals and tourists alike.

"Hmm, we don't want the police to take us down-

town again. You two need to get some normal clothing and blend in a bit more," Hiroshi commanded his two bodyguards, reluctant to make the same mistake twice.

"But the ninja outfit is our battle uniform. To remove such is to denounce all that we are...however, for your plan to succeed, we have no choice," the two ninjas said, tears in their eyes.

Exaggeration was not only ingrained into the members of House of Mitarai, but their employees as well.

3

“Number 109 seems to be that building over there but...it’s so small.”

“But it’s where many of the shops the girls admire most are. It’s said new fashions are born there every day,” Ichigo explained to Hiroshi.

Hearing that, Hiroshi immediately increased his pace toward the building. Inside, streams of high school girls milled about, all dressed and made up in gaudy ways.

“Whoa. Look at them...they’re like monsters! And their nails are so long. What’s this? There’s some sort of pattern on the tips of their nails...how...strange.”

“That’s called nail art, Hiroshi. It’s currently very popular among young girls,” Ichigo advised. Though she did not normally dress up, she was still a woman, so she knew about many of the popular trends.

“I see...but...does it not get in the way when they wash their faces?”

Hiroshi's head spun and his eyes widened as he processed everything around him. It was overwhelming; he thought for sure he wouldn't last much longer trapped inside. Feeling like he would pass out, he stepped outside and took a deep breath. But more high school girls gathered in herds along the streets.

"Say, Azuki, why are they sitting on the ground like that? Isn't it dirty?"

Azuki's information, unlike Ichigo's, was always a bit less reliable. "That is a sort of fashion as well, sir. That form of sitting was a style perpetuated by a gang known as the teamers²⁰. The girls show their admiration and respect for the teamers by emulating how they sit."

"But look at them! It's just so unsanitary! As a man, I cannot simply let it go. And worse, you can almost see their undergarments!" Hiroshi gasped. Quickly, he made his way towards a pair of high school girls plopped on the pavement.

"We shall accompany you!" both Azuki and Ichigo proclaimed.

Hiroshi shook his head firmly. "No no. If we go in a group, those girls will surely feel humiliated. I must go by myself. But if something happens, I'll call for you. Why don't you two...go over there, to that crepe

stand. Sample a few while you wait for me. I hear the girls like those as well.”

“Your insight, as always, is astounding, Hiroshi... To be so considerate of a young woman’s feelings is a trait not many men possess. Well done, sir!” Azuki said with a respectful bow.

“I shall take my leave and investigate the crepe shop. I’ve always wanted to try the strawberries with fresh whipped cream.” Ichigo replied.

“As shall I...”

Both Azuki and Ichigo disappeared amid the throng of people. Once rid of them, Hiroshi walked jauntily towards the two high school girls.

“I say, I beg an audience, madam!” Hiroshi proclaimed to one of the high school girls. She had blonde dyed hair and wore a healthy amount of blue eye shadow and eye liner on her face, among other things.

“Huh? Whaccha say? Miki? Did ya catch that?”

The girl named Miki put her hand to her ear in an exaggerated fashion and asked Hiroshi to repeat himself. “Eh? I don’t know what he said. It sounded like one of those old samurai movies. Hey, kid, whaccha say again?”

“I said I wish to beg an audience with you! Do

you not understand that?"

"Huh? Whoa, this kid is, like, totally talking funny, don't ya think? He's crackin' me up, for real."

"Me too. I'm laughin' so hard my mouth's gonna fly off...so, like, what are you beggin' for again?"

"No no! I'm not begging. I'm here to give you both a few words of advisement. That is, I'm here to inform you that your manner of sitting is quite unsanitary and conducive to the transference of germs."

"What's that? Are you seriously lecturin' us, kid? Look, it's none of your business, so just leave us alone, okay? We can sit like this if we want to. Who do you think you are anyway?"

"But when you sit like that...people can...can almost see your undergarments... A traditional Japanese maiden must not show her undergarments publicly like that!"

"Ohmigosh! This kid's got to be in elementary school, right? But he's already checkin' out our undies! Eww, gross me out!"

"N-no! It's not like that!" Hiroshi denied forcefully. His face turned bright red.

"Oh, lookit him blush. That's so cute in like, a really strange way. I thought the way he talks was funny enough, but he's even got samurai movie hair

to go with it. Kinda like a miniature Mito Komon²¹, don'tcha think?"

"Yeah, I totally see that. But he's also kinda reminds me of, like, a toy too. Like you could just wind him up and he'd sputter around and stuff... Say, since he's a toy, how about we have a bit of fun with him?"

"Ooh, that's a good idea. Let's play... Alrighty then, I'm Yumi, and that's Miki over there... So, little boy, you wanna come play with us *big* girls?"

Hiroshi found himself drenched in a cold, clammy sweat. After all, he hadn't had the opportunity, much less reason, to speak to young girls before he met these two.

"Actually, I've got some place I must be off too. So sorry to have to decline your invitation," he stammered.

"Eh? You're gonna just *leave* us?" Miki looked at Hiroshi—who had turned from bright red to pale blue in a second flat—with a worried look in her eyes.

"Yes, I was actually on my way to purchase some clothing..." He said the words timidly, not knowing what to expect. Like a frog being stared down by a snake, he was powerless before these girls, his usual gusto suddenly gone.

"Oh, that's cool, kid. Why don't we go together then? As you can tell, we've both got super fashion sense. We'll make sure to deck you out like a *stud*." Yumi pumped her fist in a guts pose.

"Urm..."

"Yeah?"

"I have a name and it's Hiroshi Mitarai. So if you would, stop calling me kid!" Hiroshi said, mustering all the energy left in him to do so. He could not allow himself to continually be swept away by them.

Both of them glared at Hiroshi, who, once more, began to panic.

"What? Mitarai? That's so weird. Did you say '*tarai*'? Like a tub?"

"It's not nice to tease your elders. Bad things happen to little boys for that."

Hiroshi took out his notepad and skillfully wrote the kanji for "Mitarai" for the two girls to see.

"Otearai...dai...as in, 'big toilet?' Are you serious about your last name? Ohmigod, that's *soooooo* hilarious," Yumi laughed loudly, clapping her hands.

"Wh...what's so funny?"

"Well...this totally means 'poop,' ya know. You can't go around with a name like that. *Seriously*."

Ignoring Hiroshi's question completely, Miki starting laughing too, clutching her stomach.

"Don't say that!"

That was usually the first thing people noticed about his name, and he was tired of being laughed at for it. All at once, the blood rushed to his head. He was about to explode.

Darn them! I'll flee from this place! I took pity upon them, and this is how they treat me?

The thought did not last long and was replaced by a calmer one. These two were closer in age to him than Azuki or Ichigo were. They were probably a better choice to pick out clothes for him. Perhaps his meeting with these aberrant creatures was actually a blessing in disguise from his ancestors.

In that case, he had no choice! Hiroshi bowed his head deeply. "I ask that you kindly assist me with my clothing selection!"

And so, with two flowers in his hands—Miki and Yumi—Hiroshi ventured into the city of Shibuya.



"So like, what kind of clothes are you lookin' for anyway?" Miki asked, scanning the various shops out

the corner of her eye.

"I wish to be popular. I have a rival I must defeat."

"Really—? I guess you kids nowadays have it rough too."

"Well, first thing's first," Yumi said, just a little meanly as she examined Hiroshi up and down. "Your hair. I think you need to change that. Girls nowadays don't go for the whole 'bowl cut' thing."

"What sort of hair styles do they like?"

"Don't worry, silly. Leave everything to us."

Miki and Yumi tapped their chests confidently. Contrary to their frightening appearances, they seemed to be good girls at heart.

"Whaccha think?" Miki said. "Shall we dress him all *street*? I mean, that kinda works for almost any body type and it, like, just looks cool too."

Yumi nodded. "Yeah, for sure. How about we go with a bit of camo and fatigues then? Since that's *totally* in right now."

The two dragged Hiroshi along to a number of stores and began to pick out some clothes for him.

"Oohh! These are BDUs²²!" Hiroshi said excitedly. "I have some at home. These are indispensable to training for sure...but...the ones you picked out are

so big. Do they have any smaller sizes?" He asked of Miki and Yumi as he held each piece of clothing up to his body.

Miki and Yumi exchanged sighs. "Training? What are you talking about? This is the style... You really don't know anything, do you, Hiroshi?"

"No, that's not true. I've been studying very hard."

Yumi rolled her eyes. "Girls don't usually go for guys that only know how to study either."

"But what's so wrong about having an education and being knowledgeable? My favorite topic of late is history. Say, do you happen to know what era the Kamakura Bakufu was founded?" Hiroshi puffed his chest out as he spoke.

"I don't know, like, urm, how about a hundred years ago?" Yumi answered carelessly. She continued to rifle through the clothing racks, clearly uninterested in the subject.

"What are you talking about! Remember the shogunate's motto? 'Let's make a better country!' The Kamakura Shogunate? ...It was 1192 of course!"

"Wow, nice...but...knowing stuff like that doesn't equal popularity," Miki said. She didn't bother to conceal the, *Sheesh, don't you even know that?* look

on her face.

"Well then, what, if anything, should I know?"

Miki pulled a shirt from the rack, then put it back. "Being educated is fine, but you also need to know how to have fun. It wouldn't hurt to learn where a couple of the hot spots are as well. Or else, what on Earth are you going to chat about when you're on a date or somethin'? You're too uptight, Hiroshi. Just learn to relax a little."

"I see. So that's important too is it? ...Very well, I'll jot it down."

In his note pad, he wrote the following words:

"It's important to play as well." Pearls of wisdom by Yumi.

As she picked out clothing, a mischievous look suddenly flashed in Yumi's eyes. "Hmmm, this normal fashion is so...boring." She began to pick out clothes that seemed to Hiroshi to be a different style than before. She held a sample up to Miki, and Miki smirked, an equally wicked gleam in her eyes. With renewed fervor, the two girls picked out a new ensemble for Hiroshi. They even picked out a pair of sunglasses and some accessories to match.

"These are a bit more...gaudy than the others, don't you think?" Hiroshi said. "Like this one for example. I do believe it's almost...shining." He didn't dare to go against the two girls, so he obediently bought everything they told him to.

"Don't worry about a thing. Just trust us, okay?"

As it was his first time out shopping, seeing so many clothes, Hiroshi couldn't help but be excited. He began to enjoy himself more as the day progressed. The more he enjoyed himself, the more he began to relax around Miki and Yumi. Soon, he was able to speak his mind and ask them questions without freezing up. While they were in one particular shop, Hiroshi asked them a question.

"Tell me, why does everyone wear sweatshirts with numbers on them? Are they members of some team or club?"

"Oh no. Those numbers don't mean a thing. But right now, sweatshirts and parkas with numbers or logos are all the rage, ya see," Yumi explained.

"All the rage, eh...? Let me jot that down..."

Hiroshi's conscientiousness in writing everything down greatly amused the two girls. When the three were just about finished with their shopping spree, Hiroshi's stomach let out a loud grumble.

"Well then, guess it's time to eat!" the girls decided.

They took Hiroshi's hand and led him to a hamburger shop. Blinking rapidly, Hiroshi stepped inside. This was the very first hamburger shop he had ever been in. As for his first hamburger...

"Nuu! This is delicious. So this is a hamburger, is it? I was told that junk food was bad for you and to avoid it at all costs, but this isn't bad at all. And the price...why it's the same as that cup of instant noodles I bought at the convenience store earlier..."

"Right? We always eat these...the cheaper the better!" Miki said, closely watching Hiroshi eat. He seemed genuinely impressed with everything. "Something about the way you talk totally reminds me of my grandpa."

"Ya ya, totally," Yumi chimed in. "Like, we're talking at each other, but not really with, right? ...But since you're funny, like a toy, we can at least put up with you."

Miki and Yumi continued to nitpick about everything and anything that Hiroshi did or didn't do. Hiroshi wasn't quite sure why they enjoyed it so and why they couldn't stop laughing at him.

So many strange people in this world, he thought.

Despite all the jibes, they eventually finished shopping. Hiroshi looked particularly satisfied, carrying large shopping bags in each hand.

"Alrighty. You're all set. ... Well, we've got a party to go to, so see ya, kiddo," Miki said shortly, waving bye. Perhaps her mind was filled with thoughts of the party, because just like that, she was in ready-to-go mode.

"If you manage to snag yourself a girl, come see us again, okay? We're always hangin' out around here somewhere..." Yumi let her sentence trail off as she too began to walk towards the train station.

"Yes, of course. Thank you. Please know how deeply appreciative I am for everything you've done for me," Hiroshi called to the girls, bowing his head deeply as they walked away.

"Oh, don't be so formal," Yumi laughed. "Thanks yourself. You helped us waste a ton of time!"

"Seriously, Hiroshi, you're *sooo* funny. Now, just remember what we told you and stick to it okay? We guarantee you'll become popular if you do... Take care now!"

The two girls gave Hiroshi a big wave and disappeared into the crowded city of Shibuya.

Hiroshi grinned widely to himself. "Once you

get used to that gaudy makeup, those girls sure look cute."

Meanwhile, as Miki and Yumi walked away...

"You think we might have gone a bit overboard?" Yumi asked.

"You think?"

"Even if he doesn't know a lot about the real world, he should know right away we were messing with him, right? Once he looks in a mirror, that is."

Miki nodded. "Oh yeah, you're right. But, it sure feels good to shop even when it's not for you, doesn't it? I got rid of *sooo* much stress."

"Yeah, totally! Now we're all ready to pick us up some hotties. Just remember to avoid anything that resembles Hiroshi!"

Miki and Yumi looked at each other and laughed.



"Hiroshi, we've been looking all over for you!"

Just moments after saying his goodbyes to Miki and Yumi, Hiroshi came upon Azuki and Ichigo. Immediately, something about Ichigo caught Hiroshi's eye.

"Ichigo, there's still whipped cream around your

mouth.”

“Hah! My apologies! But the crepes were so delicious I had no choice but to partake of five of them!”

Azuki frowned. “I tried to remind her to look for you, but she just...”

“Don’t worry about it. I had quite a bit of fun on my own... Ayanokoji, just you wait for tomorrow. I’ll make you regret the day you were born! *Waha-haahahah!*!”

Hiroshi’s shrill laughter echoed through the busy Shibuya night.

4

And so, the day of destiny arrived.

"What is wrong with him?"

"Why is he smirking like that?"

Hiroshi stood proudly in front of Takashi's school, chest puffed out like a pastry. He was in a very good mood. "See how the peasants look upon me with awe?"

Azuki and Ichigo both lowered their heads as if to say, "Yes, if you say so."

Hiroshi hoped the two would further compliment him, and was rather disappointed by their silence.

It was the same time as the day before; school had just let out. The friendly trio of Takashi, Kotarou and Koboshi soon emerged from the school gates.

"Hmm? There's those people again. Let's go check it out," Koboshi said, the busy-body in her coming out in force.

"Sheesh, Uematsu, you sure can't sit still, can you?" Takashi said.

"She's been really curious and inquisitive since I've known her. But I think it's one of her best traits," Kotarou mused.

"I guess you'll never be bored with her sticking her nose into everything." With his backpack bouncing back and forth, Takashi followed slowly behind Koboshi.

"Oh my goodness! It's...amazing! Hurry and come check it out!" Koboshi exclaimed as she ran back to the boys after doing a bit of recon on the situation.

"What is?"

"What's going on up there?"

"I can't explain it with words. You've just got to see it yourself! Hurry!"

Takashi and Kotarou ran after Koboshi. And then...

"Holy cow!"

"Now that's a brave man."

Both Takashi and Kotarou stared agape at the sight before them.

Surrounded by a circle of people and looking quite triumphant was...Hiroshi, of course.

But his outfit was...something else. He wore bright red faux leather pants, and a tight, golden baby T. Around his waist was a brown belt with a wide buckle, and on his shoulders was draped a faux leather jacket. On his feet were white platform shoes so high his ankles looked like they might buckle any minute, and on his face sat huge, mirrored sunglasses. As for his hair, instead of his usual bowl cut, he sported an obnoxious Afro wig. But worst of all, in his hand, for some inexplicable reason, he brandished a hamburger.

"We decided to go with a really cool, funky look, which wouldn't be complete without this!" the girls had told him, pushing the hamburger into his hand at the very last minute. Having grown up so sheltered, Hiroshi was also terribly naïve.

"I think my mom has a picture of an outfit like that in one of her fashion magazines from thirty years ago," Koboshi mumbled with an astonished look on her face.

It was a psychedelic ensemble indeed...the likes of which one would definitely not see in this day and age.

Everyone whispered their theories to one another.

"I wonder if he's advertising for a circus or something?"

"A circus performer? He looks like he's about our age!"

To Hiroshi, however, their ridiculing whispers sounded more like whispers of admiration.

Fufufufufufu! Thanks Miki, Yumi. Because of you, I, heir to the House of Mitarai, Hiroshi Mitarai, have finally defeated my rival! And now, for the coup d' grace! I shall now strike the number one ranked pose, as per the distributed questionnaires. Yes, that pose!

And the pose Hiroshi chose was...

"Gently brushing his bangs out of his face."

Ugh, but this dastardly wig is so shaggy and unkempt. It'll be harder to do that than with normal hair so I must put a little more effort into it. With extra oomph, Hiroshi brushed his wig's bangs out of his face.

PYUHHNN! He must have put a little too much into it, because the wig flew right off his head and up into the sky.

"Oh my gosh!"

"How lame!"

Suddenly, the crowd erupted into boisterous laughter.



“What is the meaning of this? Why are you all laughing?!” Overwhelmed by their laughter, Hiroshi began to panic. “But I laid such a meticulous plan. How could this possibly happen?” he shouted at the crowd. He reached up to hold his head with his hands.

It was then he noticed his wig was missing. Just as he thought it was all over, he remembered he had a Plan B. Miki and Yumi had left him with one final, top secret plan.

“If you learn how to dance the Para Para²³, you’ll definitely become popular.”

If I do that, I can turn the tides and bring the populace around again!

Taking their advice to heart, Hiroshi had his trusted butler order a Para Para how-to-video, which Hiroshi practiced until the wee hours of the morning.

“Toryaaahhhh!”

With a burst of *kiai*, Hiroshi began to dance. As he danced, Azuki and Ichigo warned the crowd to back up or else, in order to make a space for their master to dance. Intimidated by the two ninja, the jeering crowd meekly backed away; some had no choice but to pour into the street. Meanwhile...

Seeing Hiroshi dance, new whispers overtook those about his clothes.

"Oh my goodness. He's got absolutely NO rhythm!"

"What's he dressed like that for, if he was just going to bon dance²⁴?!"

From the perspective of everyone gathered, the dance Hiroshi performed was as far from the Para Para as it could possibly get.

Unfortunately for Hiroshi, the Japanese blood flowing in his veins was much too strong for him to conquer, forcing him to launch into a more traditional folk dance.

As Hiroshi continued to perform for the crowd, he spotted the form of his greatest rival, Takashi Ayanokoji.

"Aha! There you are! I've come to declare a formal victory over you!" Taking a deep breath, Hiroshi took a step towards Takashi.

"Oh my gosh, that weirdo...he's coming right for us! How scary!" With a squeal, Koboshi fled.

"Oh man, she's right! But why do you think he's staring at us like that!" Takashi turned his back on Hiroshi and began to run in the opposite direction.

"...But that wig was so...so awful, don't you think? ...Anyhow, let's get out of here. Quick." Kotarou also turned around, on the heels of his two friends.

“Wait! How dare you turn your back on me in a fight! Be a man, Takashi Ayanokoji!” Hiroshi did his best to break through the crowd and run towards Takashi as he shouted out the words, but they never reached his nemesis’ ears.

Only Kotarou turned around, thinking he might have heard something. But all he saw was a thick crowd of people, and not even a trace of the strangely dressed boy.

I thought he might have called out Ten-chan’s name, but...I must have been hearing things. Still, there sure are a lot of strange people in this world, Kotarou thought with a shrug.

But something about the strange boy’s haircut was so familiar to Kotarou. He just couldn’t place it. *I wonder where I’ve seen him before... I think it was pretty recent, but hmmm... I just can’t remember.*

As Kotarou tapped on his forehead trying to jog his memory, someone tapped lightly on his right shoulder.

“Whatcha doing, Kotarou?” a voice shouted. It was Koboshi.

Pii poooh piii pooohhh... ♪ Sounds of a police siren closed in around them. Then the loud, scolding voice of an officer with a megaphone. “All right,

folks, out of the streets. You're blocking traffic. Who's responsible for this? Whose idea was it to put on this weird performance?"

"Of course the cars can't get through with all those people gathered in the street," Koboshi said as she gazed over the crowd of people.

"Yeah. Not to mention it was pretty creepy to watch in the first place," Takashi added with a nod, sneaking up on Kotarou and Koboshi.

"Say, wanna stop someplace and grab a bite?" Kotarou asked. It was rather out of character for him to make the suggestion; he normally went straight home.

"I got a hamburger craving, watching that weirdo perform," he admitted.

"Ooh, good idea," Koboshi said. "Let's go and grab a burger!"

The three friends skipped from the scene and towards their favorite hamburger shop.

"Goodness, not you again?"

Hiroshi found himself face to face with the same officer as yesterday.

"You must really have a thing for causing disturbances, huh, Kid? ...But I wish you wouldn't do

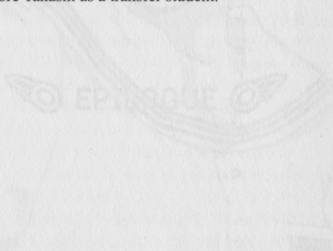
things like that in such a high traffic area. See all the trouble you've caused?"

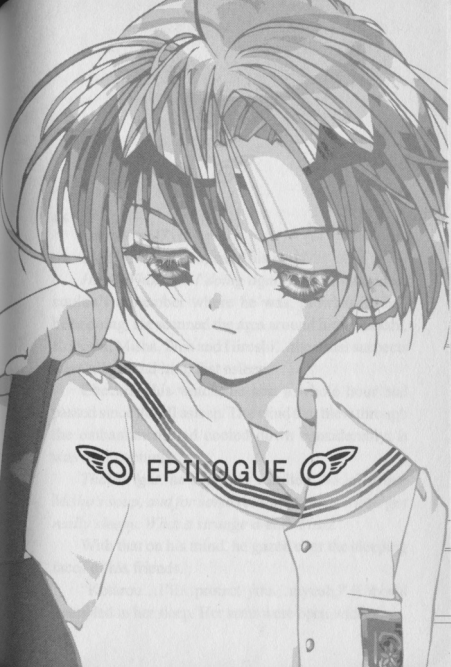
"It's not what you think..." But Hiroshi's will had already been broken. "Why...what did I do wrong?!" he yelled.

Ever since he made the decision to get directly involved with Takashi Ayanokoji, not one good thing had happened to him. *That kid is surely my bad luck charm!*

With that thought, he cried out again. "Takashi Ayanokoji ... More than anything in this world... I HATE YOU—!!"

Precisely five days after that, Hiroshi appeared before Takashi as a transfer student.





❧ EPILOGUE ❧



“Yawwwwn!”

Slowly, Kotarou opened his eyes.

Huh? What was I doing again? For a second he couldn't remember where he was, or what he had been doing. He scanned the area around him. Takashi, Koboshi, Misha, Shia and Hiroshi...the usual suspects were all around him, fast asleep.

Checking his watch, he saw a whole hour had passed since he fell asleep. The wind that blew through the embankment had cooled down considerably; it was near evening.

That's right, he suddenly recalled. We all drank Misha's soup, and for some reason or other we all got really sleepy. What a strange dream I had.

With that on his mind, he gazed over the sleeping faces of his friends.

“Kotarou...I'll...protect you...mynah,” Koboshi mumbled in her sleep. Her arms were open wide.

Takashi had a big grin on his face, as if he was admiring a beautiful view. "The view up here is really awesome..."

I wonder if Koboshi and Ten-chan both had the same dream as me... Nah, it couldn't be...

"I must be off soon..." Shia mumbled sadly in her sleep.

"I'm gonna make Kotarou happies~su!" Just like when she was awake, Misha's sleepy talk was equally energetic.

Seeing everyone's sleeping face, Kotarou couldn't help but smile.

"NuuuoOOOOhhHhHhHH! I shan't lose to hiiiiiiiiimmm!" Hiroshi suddenly cried out in his sleep.

Hiroshi's shout nudged the others out of their deep sleep and they slowly began to stir. It even snapped Kotarou out of the peaceful trance he was in, staring into the faces of his sleeping friends. Surprised, he jumped to his feet.

Koboshi was the first to wake up. "Wha? Is it a fire? Or an earthquake?"

"It's okay, Koboshi," Kotarou said calmly. "I think Dai-chan was just talking in his sleep is all."

One by one, the others began to wake, triggered

by Hiroshi's outburst. Everyone let out a huge yawn and looked rather refreshed by their naps.

Takashi stared into Hiroshi's sleeping face. "Yawnnn. Sheesh, what a dolt. Even fast asleep he's way over the top..." He looked up with an impish grin, then grabbed Hiroshi's nose and squeezed it shut.

With a terrific yelp, Hiroshi awoke. "UGAAH-HHH!"

Takashi must have gotten him good; as he sat, his shoulders heaved up and down heavily. "Good Lord, was that ever a bad dream... *Hmm?* What's going on here?"

Seeing everyone's gaze on him, Hiroshi's eyes widened. But they were all quickly forgotten as he heard a soft chortle escape from Takashi. Hiroshi looked over at Takashi with an insinuating glare.

"What did you do to me, infidel?"

"N-nothing really... I just squeezed your nostrils shut since you were hollering so loud in your sleep is all," Takashi said coolly.

"S...so that's why I suffered so much in my dream! It was *your* fault! You weren't simply happy with ruining my intellectual life, but my dreamtime as well, eh? You never cease to amaze me, you despicable lout!" Hiroshi was so angry steam might as well b

coming out of his head.

"Oh, stop it, both of you, Ten-chan, Dai-chan." Kotarou got between the two and stopped them from lunging at one another.

"Oh, lookit this. Always the good boy, huh? Kotarou?"

Takashi's words put a grimace on Kotarou's face. "And just what is that supposed to mean, eh? Ten-chan?"

"That's right, Higuchi! Take him out! Take that pesky Ayanokoji right out!" Hiroshi sneered, throwing grease on the fire.

Angry, Kotarou couldn't stop himself from lashing out. "First off, be quiet, Dai-chan! You're always yapping all the time. And speaking of your yapping, it's way weird, you know? The way you talk!"

"What? Are you talking to me?! I will *not* tolerate a mere *peasant* like you presuming to lecture me, heir of the House of Mitarai! *Toryaahh!* Take that!" Hiroshi suddenly sent a flying kick at Kotarou.

WHAM!

Kotarou dropped to the ground like a rock. "Oww! Oww! Did you really have to go that far?"

"Hey, what do you think you're doing to Kotarou?!" Seeking to assist Kotarou, Koboshi kicked

out at Hiroshi. "Take that!" It was quite a powerful strike.

Suddenly, everyone was at each other's throats, kicking and yelling. A throw landed there with a "THUD" and a punch landed here with a "POW!" Within a matter of seconds, a peaceful nap turned into an all out brawl.

"Everyone stooooooppppp~su! Stooppppp~su!!"

At first, Misha got right into the mix of things in an attempt to calm everyone down. But she quickly ended up being no help at all, merely watching from the sidelines and flailing her arms in the air with exasperation.

"D'ohhhh! It makes me *sooo* sad when everyone's angry with one another~su."

Unable to interfere, Misha could only watch with a furrowed brow. Shia stood beside her, looking rather unfazed.

At the height of the rumble, Shia, who always seemed to move at her own pace and marched to the tune of her own drum, slowly made an announcement.

"I have a delicious purin²⁵ I prepared for everyone today. Everyone that's not fighting, that is."

Previously filled with the hustle and bustle of

flying kicks, raging fists and a whole lot of fury, the embankment was suddenly dead quiet. When Shia mentioned pudding, everyone froze in place.

"Woohoo!"

Giving an excited hoot, everyone immediately separated and sat down in their chairs. Like birds eagerly awaiting their mother to feed them, they waited for Shia, spoons gleaming in their hands and anticipation glittering in their eyes.

Misha hurriedly took her seat as well. "I guess I can't beat your flan can I, Shia~su? But since flan is so yummys, I guess it's all good~su!"

Then, in perfect unison, they all broke into the chant, "Flan, flan! We want flan!"

"Yes yes, one moment."

Just as quick as they had been to anger, feasting on Shia's homemade flan the crew once more regained their merry mood.

Kotarou couldn't help but get a funny feeling in his heart and mulled over a few things.

I wonder why, even though everyone's so eccentric, it's so much fun being around them? I wonder how long we'll be able to stay friends, having fun the way we are...?

Kotarou knew one day there might come a time where they had to say goodbye... But until that day, he wanted to cherish every moment they spent together.

Because to him, each and every memory they shared was a precious treasure.

So Kotarou wished with all his heart that the days would go on forever and ever like this...together...

The End

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Translation Notes

¹ *Fugashi* is a candy-like steamed cake, made of brown sugar, wheat flour and gluten. The other candies mentioned in this passage include “apricot candy,” which is also known as “*Anzu Ame*,” and a “soy dusted rice cake,” which is called “*Kinako Mochi*” in Japanese.

² A “*teru teru bozu*” is a cloth or paper doll that looks kind of like a ghost. It is made to ward off bad weather.

³ The rabbit is referring to the proverb: 石橋を叩いて壊す. (Translation: Tapping on a stone bridge and breaking it.) That is, even though the bridge ahead is sturdy, if one keeps tapping on it every step of the way to test its sturdiness, it will eventually break from the repeated taps. (i.e. You can be over cautious!)

⁴ *Kamaitachi* is both a wind so strong it can cut you, and a weasel-like monster wielding a sickle that, in the guise of the wind, cuts innocent travelers.

⁵ *Temari* is a Japanese game of handball. It was more of a super slow paced catch amongst the ladies of the court or little girls in the past.

⁶ *Seiza* means “proper sitting posture” with one’s shins folded under while sitting on tatami mats. To the Japanese, this is the most efficient, beautiful, and “proper sitting posture” while engaged in a formal activity.

⁷ *Kuro* means “black.” Naming a cat Kuro would be like calling him “Blackie.”

⁸ *Akotatsu* is a table with a heater installed underneath. It keeps your feet warm when it’s cold outside.

⁹ Class Participation Day (sometimes translated as “Parent Participation Day”) – In most Japanese schools, usually it is the mother who attends her child’s class on this day.

¹⁰ *Shinai* – A bamboo practice sword like that used in kendo.

¹¹ *Kiai* is a life force, spiritual energy similar to that of Ki or Chi.

¹² *Naginata* – A weapon used in feudal Japan consisting of an ovate wooden shaft measuring approximately 6-8 feet in length with a curved blade on the end of it. The blade measures between 1 and 3 feet, and is sharpened on one side. Naginata is the Japanese martial art of both power and grace, characterized by the grandeur of its sweeping movements.

¹³ *Kendo* is the path of the sword while *Kyudo* is the path of the bow.

¹⁴ *Niou* are guardian demons of Buddha, who subjugate all enemies of Buddhism. Like gargoyles on churches, *Niou* guard temple gates.

¹⁵ *Sarutobi* means “monkey jump.” Japanese pop culture often portrays Sarutobi as having been orphaned and raised by a band of monkeys. It is with them he learned monkey-like agility and quickness, especially within trees.

¹⁶ *Kemari* is a form of football, revived in modern times, that was popular in Japan during the Heian Period.

¹⁷ *Shogi* is Japanese chess.

¹⁸ Mitari and Kaoru are mimicking a really old and really famous 80's commercial for an energy drink called "Fight! Ippatsu." In the commercial, there are also two mountain climbers who, with the aid of one another and their energy drink, make it to the top. Fight! Ippatsu literally means, "One shot of fight/guts."

¹⁹ *Azuki* means black beans. *Ichigo* means strawberry.

²⁰ "Teamers" are groups of people who meet to sit around and smoke while occasionally beating and bullying those around them. Though sometimes in Japan the word Teamers is interchangeable with gang, Teamers are different from gangs in that no one of the Teamers moves without the other Teamers in the group—they act as a "team."

²¹ The Mito Komon these girls are referring to is from an old TV show based on the real life Lord Mitsukuni of Mito, the shogun's uncle. In the TV series, he was a bit like *Kung Fu's* David Carradine, going here and there and solving cases of corruption and injustice.

²² BDU = Battle Dress Uniform.

²³ *Para Para* is a dance mostly involving the upper body. Being a little like a line dance, it is most often compared to the *Macarena* with moves paired with sections of techno or europop songs.

²⁴ A *bon dance* is the traditional folk dance done during the summer's Bon Festival (a.k.a. the Festival of the Dead or the Lantern Festival).

²⁵ *Purin* – A custard-like Japanese pudding dessert; it can be eaten with various toppings, such as cream, caramel, or honey. *Purin* is a versatile delicacy often eaten with almost any meal.

Honorifics

Honorifics are a facet of Japanese culture that are used in polite speech to indicate a person's status or relationship towards another individual.

-chan – Found as part of the nicknames for Takashi and Hiroshi ("Ten-chan" and "Dai-chan," respectively), this honorific is used in this series as a way to convey a sense of cuteness and intimacy towards friends.

Oniisama – Used by Kaoru as a sign of respect for her older brother, Hiroshi. This title literally means “big brother.”



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Blood Type: O

An author and writer who loves idols and can't get enough of new trends and trend hopping. Keeps a check on all the ongoing dramas. Loves works like director Yukihiro Tsutsumi's *Trick 2* whose dialogue is ridden with puns and double meanings. Roots for Hiroshi out of all the *Pita-Ten* characters.



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